

**Exploring the Crisis Management Strategies of Teams in the National Lacrosse League
During the COVID-19 Pandemic.**

A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Science in Marketing, University of Saskatchewan,
Saskatoon, Canada

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Abstract

The world has gone through many crises, including devastating pandemics, in the past. At present, the world continues grappling with the COVID-19 (SARS-COV-2) pandemic. In the first year of the pandemic, nations chose to go into lockdowns to reduce the severity of the crisis, using actions that included staying-at-home orders and business closures. An industry that was forced to close was the professional sports industry. On March 11th, 2020, the National Basketball Association announced that their league was temporarily stopping play because of the pandemic, with many other leagues following suit. After establishing safety protocols to keep teams (and fans) safe, top-tier professional sports leagues restarted during the pandemic. However, second-tier leagues struggled in finding a way to restart or begin their seasons, while some of these second-tier leagues had to cancel their season entirely.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the actions and strategies that professional sports teams and leagues have been taking through the COVID-19 crisis. The literature review provides insights into crisis management strategy as it has been studied across many fields, including professional sports. Turning to one of the most studied perspectives, a three-phase crisis management strategy provides the platform for evaluating the pre-crisis, during-crisis, and post-crisis actions taken in professional sports. The pre-crisis phase is focused on planning on what to do for potential crises. During a crisis, organizations pick the strategies created in the pre-crisis phase that would best limit the damage from the crisis that they currently face. Finally, the post-crisis phase focuses on learning from the strategies implemented, taking feedback and redesigning strategies for future crises. Case study methods were used for this research, using seven semi-structured interviews and press releases, websites, and social media content to gather and interpret data. The findings tell the story of how four teams, along with the league headquarters of the National Lacrosse League (NLL), handled themselves during the pandemic, a time of great uncertainty for everyone. Analysis of transcripts included identifying the frequency that actions were taken that matched the best practices advice from the literature on the three-phase crisis management strategy.

It was revealing, with ample indications, that teams and the league had little of the pre-crisis underlayment recommended by the literature. These actions meant that there was little anticipation of, nor preparation for, significant scale crises. When the pandemic struck, there was nothing “in the books” to turn to by the NLL, i.e., no game plan for crises. However, there were many strategies utilized. For example, there was much communication that allowed for the best strategies to be created. Because the COVID-19 pandemic is still happening, there is not much information on the post-crisis phase of the NLL, although the interviewees provided many forward-looking observations.

Keywords: Crisis Management, Professional Sports, Crisis, COVID-19

Acknowledgments

I would like to very much thank the academic and financial support from the University of Saskatchewan and their Graduate Teacher Fellowship Program. I would also like to thank the Edwards School of Business, especially their staff and faculty for supporting me through this journey, as well as providing me with much guidance on my time in graduate school, especially my committee members. I would like to give a special thanks to Dr. William H. Murphy for his guidance and feedback on this thesis. A special thank you goes out to the participants from the National Lacrosse League (NLL) for taking time out of their days to be involved in this research. Finally, I cannot thank my friends and family enough for being so supportive and helpful during this time. I sincerely am grateful and appreciate for all of you. **Thank you.**

Table of Contents

Permission To Use.....	i
Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Tables.....	v
List of Figures.....	vi
 Chapter One: Introduction.....	 1
1.1 Rationale For the Study	1
1.2 Purpose For the Study	5
1.3 Thesis Organization	5
 Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	 6
2.1 Crises.....	6
2.2 Crisis Management.....	17
2.2.1 The Three Phase Crisis Management Strategy.....	21
2.2.2 Crisis Management & COVID-19.....	25
2.3 Crises & Professional Sports.....	25
2.4 Crisis Management & Professional Sports.....	26
2.4.1 Professional Sports & the COVID-19 Crisis.....	27
2.4.2 Professional Sports & COVID-19 Crisis Management Research	30
 Chapter Three: Methods.....	 32
3.1 Choosing the Right Case.....	32
3.2 Participants & Sampling.....	34
3.3 Data Collection.....	36
3.4 Data Analysis & Representation of the Data.....	38
3.5 Ethical Considerations.....	39
 Chapter Four: Results.....	 41
4.1 Background: The National Lacrosse League (NLL).....	41
4.2 Pre Crisis Phase: December 2019-February 2020.....	43
4.3 The Crisis Phase: March 2020.....	46
4.3.1 Professional Sports, Crisis Management, & COVID-19.....	47
4.3.2 The Crisis Phase: March 12 th 2020-March 31 st 2020.....	50
4.4 The Crisis Phase: April 2020-Spring 2021.....	50
4.5 Heading into the Post Crisis Phase: Spring 2021 and the 2021-2022 Season.....	53
4.6 Final Reflections Across the Pandemic (January 2020-Spring 2021).....	61
4.7 Using the Three-Phase crisis management strategy to understand the actions of the NLL.....	62
 Chapter Five: Discussion.....	 69
5.1 Theoretical Implications.....	69
5.2 Practical Implications.....	71
5.3 Research Limitations & Future Research Recommendations.....	72
 Chapter Six: Conclusion.....	 75

References.....	77
Appendix A Ethics Approval Certificate.....	92
Appendix B Sample Email.....	93
Appendix C Consent Form.....	94
Appendix D Interview Questions.....	97
Appendix E Crisis Management, COVID-19, Sports Figure.....	98

List of Tables

Table 2.1. Crises Definitions.....	9
Table 2.2. An Array of Organizational Crisis.....	11
Table 2.3. SCCT crisis Classifications.....	11
Table 2.4. Crisis Management Definitions	16
Table 2.5. Three Phase Crisis Management Strategy Research	20
Table 3.1. Participant Demographics	41
Table 4.1. Three-phase crisis management strategy Analysis.....	78

List of Figures

Figure 2.1. Crisis Management Process.....	18
Figure 2.2. Crisis Management Process.....	19
Figure 2.3. COVID-19, Crisis Management, & Professional Sports.....	38

Chapter One: Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is arguably the most demanding non-wartime scenario in living memory that people across the globe have had to endure.

Steier and Moxham (2020)

1.1 Rationale and Context for the Study

Crises are perceived by managers and stakeholders as highly salient, unexpected, and potentially disruptive (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, Coombs 2016). Crises take many forms and may have isolated effects or extensive effects on individuals, families, communities, cities, nations, or even the entire world. No one is exempt from potentially facing—and dealing with—crises. This seeming inevitability, accompanied by the uncertainty of both occurrence and scale, makes it challenging to anticipate and choose a strategy to handle a crisis when it occurs. Currently, the world is facing a crisis of mass proportions with the SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic. COVID-19 presents the perfect opportunity to learn how an externally provoked crisis forces us to recover as strongly as we can. Numerous studies have examined the effects of both internally induced and externally produced crises (Benson 1988; Blake & Sinclair 2003; Bowonder & Linstone 1987; Brown & Brown 2020; Evans & Elphick 2005; Finsterwalder Yee & Tombs 2017; Henderson & Ng 2004; Hood 2012; Knittel & Stango 2014; Kozman 2013; Leung & Lam 2004; Liu Pennington-Gray & Krieger 2016; Olanrian et.al 2012; Pauchant Mitroff & Ventolo 1992; Peters & Pikkemaat 2006; Ritchie 2004; Snyder 1983; Stewart 2020; Tsang et.all 2000). Internally provoked crises are self-inflicted events, such as a product recall or scandal within an organization. Externally initiated crises come from outside of an organization, and they may be natural events (earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, pandemics, etc.) or human-caused events (wars, government disruptions, terrorist attacks, etc.) (Elliot, Harris & Baron 2005). Throughout human history, crises have been inflicted upon individuals, communities, businesses, nations, and the world. Thus, coping with a crisis can be considered a regular human activity. Little wonder that crises have been extensively studied, with crisis management research spanning numerous domains, including domestic and international politics, business, and communities (Benson 1988; Blake & Sinclair 2003; Bowonder & Linstone 1987; Brown & Brown 2020;

Evans & Elphick 2005; Finsterwalder Yee & Tombs 2017; Henderson & Ng 2004; Hood 2012; Knittel & Stango 2014; Kozman 2013; Leung & Lam 2004; Liu Pennington-Gray & Krieger 2016; Olanrian et al. 2012; Pauchant Mitroff & Ventolo 1992; Peters & Pikkemaat 2006; Ritchie 2004; Snyder 1983; Stewart 2020; Tsang 2000). The importance of crisis management is made more evident by the many journals dedicated to the topic, including *The International Journal of Crisis Response and Management*, *Crisis Response Journal*, *Journal of Emergency Management*, *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, and the *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*.

There has been an increase in environmental factors that can cause external crisis events (Ritchie 2004) and the literature examining external crises and their effects on organizations continues to grow (Evans & Elphick 2005; Liu Pennington-Gray and Kreiger 2016; Mikulic Spricic Holicek et al., 2018; Ritchie 2004). No matter how much we prepare for crises, it seems that we are never well enough prepared – the uncertainty of timing, accompanied by the uncertainty and scale of a crisis, lends itself to gaps in preparation and challenges in getting response right. This reality has never been more evident than now, given what our world has gone through with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The World Health Organization (WHO) began warning countries of a new and potentially harmful virus labelled SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) in December 2019 and January 2020 (WHO 2020). By the time the virus was declared a global pandemic in March of 2020, companies around the globe had found themselves scrambling to find ways to serve their customers while taking care of their operations and their employees' livelihoods while implementing safety measures. Currently, the world is still in the midst of this crisis, with over four million dead globally and with most countries needing many more people vaccinated before the crisis can be contained. In Canada, there are over twenty-six thousand dead and over six hundred presently hospitalized (COVID-19 Tracker 2021, date accessed July 14th, 2021). Despite vaccinations proceeding coast to coast, there are currently hundreds of daily new cases in Canada, making it evident that the crisis is far from over (Canada Public Health Agency 2021; COVID-19 Tracker Canada n.d).

Governments worldwide have imposed mandatory stay-at-home orders, mask-wearing, social distancing, and other rules over the past year, disrupting nearly every business across Canada and throughout the world. In a world turned upside down, with everyone needing to deal

with continuously changing conditions and enormous stresses, lessons are continuing to be learned by businesses. Crisis management is the new norm. It is increasingly evident that how crises are managed plays a vital role in determining how good companies emerge post-crisis.

Professional sports have an enormous impact on the economic and psychological well-being of cities, states, and even nations. As Nelson Mandela once famously said, "Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than government in breaking down racial barriers" (Mandela n.d). The North American sports industry was valued at 71.06 US billion dollars in 2018 and is expected to reach 83.1 US billion by 2023 (Gough 2019). Team valuations for major sports are high. For instance, one of North America's highest valued sports teams is the Dallas Cowboys, at 5.5 billion U.S. dollars (West 2020). The financial impact of sports extends to numerous business sectors, including hospitality, restaurants, and travel, to name just a few. In Canada, 1.7 billion dollars of sports products are exported globally, while nearly 2.9 billion dollars' worth are imported into Canada (Government of Canada 2020). Professional sports add considerable excitement and economic activity to Canadian cities. For example, the city of Edmonton built a new arena in 2016 for their sports and entertainment sector. It shifted the look of the downtown core as the amount of undeveloped land downtown shrunk by 40% (Omstead 2019). The psychological connection between fans and sports teams has also been well documented and studied (Billings & Ruibley 2013; Bodet 2012; Han et al. 2016; Park et al. 2010; Rees et al. 2015; Wann & Ensor 2001). The early work of Cialdini et al. (1976) on the psychological relationship between fans and sports teams has led to a sizable literature on the intimate relationship that fans can have with their favourite sports team: once that team becomes more important to said fan, it becomes apparent that their concept of the team becomes embedded in the self-concept of the fan (Funk & James 2001). Collectively, professional sports touch the hearts of fans and are seen by communities as a "catalyst for economic growth, as the root of civic pride, as contributors to quality of life, (and even as a) source of political gain" (Walker & Enz 2006-2007, p.163).

There are six top tier major professional sports leagues in Canada and the United States, with the biggest leagues in this category generally referred to as the "Big Four," which are the National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), Major League

Baseball (MLB) and the National Hockey League (NHL) (Daily Gazette n.d.). The two other top tier professional sports leagues are Major League Soccer (MLS) and the Canadian Football League (CFL). Commonalities among top-tier professional sports leagues are high attendance, longevity (some of these leagues are over 100 years old), and strong financial position; the "Big Four" are separated from other leagues due to their lucrative sponsorships and television deals. Television deals generate over half of the revenue stream for the "Big Four" (Mathewson 2021).

There are also professional sports leagues that might be called the second tier. These tend to be newer, with smaller fan bases, and with greater financial fragility. Some of these leagues are new to professional sports in Canada and the United States, while others are minor leagues affiliated with major professional leagues in North America. An example of one of the second-tier leagues is the Major League of Rugby (MLR). Created in 2018, the MLR launched with 13 teams in cities across the USA and Canada. One sport gaining popularity in second-tier leagues is lacrosse, with the first league established professionally in North America in the 1980s. Today, lacrosse has four professional leagues: Premier Lacrosse League (PLL), United Women's Lacrosse League (UWLL), Women's Professional Lacrosse League (WPLL), and the National Lacrosse League (NLL). The NLL is a North American lacrosse league that continues to gain popularity. Founded in 1986, NLL now has 14 teams, five in Canada and nine in the USA, with a new expansion team recently announced in Las Vegas.

Like countless other industries, professional sports have had to navigate the new normal created by COVID-19. Mass gatherings were banned because of their high ability to spread the virus, which caused all sports leagues to stop playing their games for a period of time. The ensuing year has seen the cancelling of entire seasons, bubble-style playoff rounds, and stadiums left empty or nearly empty during games. As professional sports leagues came to a sudden halt, fans everywhere have been widely affected, losing the connectedness of in-person games that they had long taken for granted. In addition to the teams and leagues, the entire economic ecosystem surrounding sports was impacted. At the time of writing, various provincial (Canada) and state (USA) governments have different rules regarding bringing fans back to games; where some stadiums are already open to 100% fan capacity, such as MLB in some states in the USA, but almost every arena and stadium in Canada has had no fans since the pandemic started. Even now, there remains considerable uncertainty about when and how professional sports can safely return to business as usual.

In the early stages of the pandemic, it was projected that the global professional sports industry would lose 3.25 billion USD in fan spending, including tickets and merchandise, 2.4 billion in sports-related tourism, and 2.2 billion in television revenue (Lange 2020). If ever there was a need to have good crisis management preparedness and to be able to engage in crisis management effectively, professional sports had this need.

1.2 Purpose for the study

The purpose of this research is to explore the ways that professional sports teams and leagues have been taking actions and engaging in strategies through one of the most severe crises on record, COVID-19. By reflecting on the activities of firms through this crisis and comparing these actions to recommended frameworks and processes for navigating crises successfully, it may be possible to determine how to prepare and plan better for future crises.

The scale of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on professional sports and the importance of professional sports to individuals, cities, and nations makes it essential to understand how professional sports have been handling the crisis. This thesis is one of the first to examine how professional sports teams have been engaged in crisis management efforts through the COVID-19 pandemic. While professional sports have addressed many crises, none have been as crippling as the present crisis, forcing leagues to find ways to cope and to engage in strategic planning throughout the crisis. Specifically, the following research question guides this work: What crisis management strategies did the National Lacrosse League apply during the COVID-19 pandemic and how and why did the league choose these strategies?

1.3 Thesis Organization

This thesis begins with a literature review that introduces crises and crisis management, including the emerging stream of crisis management research provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic. It continues with a review of professional sports in crisis, providing an understanding of the kinds of crises professional sports typically confronts, along with a review on the current research of professional sports and the COVID-19 pandemic. Following this will be sections explaining the methods, results, and discussion. Concluding will be potential areas for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The review begins with a discussion of crises, explaining the types and characteristics of crises that confront decision-makers. Then, the literature review turns to crisis management. There is extensive crisis management literature spanning the military, business, and disaster planning. Insights from the literature on crisis management strategies will provide the structure for our examination of crisis management strategies in professional sports. Specifically, perspectives on crisis management from the literature reveal *best practices* in crisis management, which are used for examining crisis management actions taken by the NLL throughout the pandemic. The literature review concludes with professional sports literature on crises and crisis management, including literature on COVID-19 and professional sports.

2.1 Crises

“These are the times that try men's souls”

- Thomas Paine (Thomas Paine: American Crisis n.d)

Although Paine’s comment was said in the context of the Continental Army struggling to resist the more vigorous, better armed, and more strategically prepared British during the American Revolution, at any time a crisis can provoke people to seek within themselves the strength to overcome. The word “crisis” has been defined many times (Pearson & Clair 1998). Based on just a few definitions given to crises faced by organizations (Table 2.1), it is reasonable to conclude that crises are events that have the potential to create significant damage, disrupt regular operations, and impact the short- and long-term future of an organization.

Table 2.1 Crisis Definitions

Author(s)	Crisis Definition
Elliott Harris & Baron (2005)	"Any organisational problem, which may have negative consequences"
Bundy Pfarrer Short & Coombs (2016)	"An event perceived by managers and stakeholders as highly salient, unexpected, and potentially disruptive"
Burnett (1998)	"A disruption that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its basic assumptions, its subjective sense of self, its existential core"
Sapriel (2003)	"An event, revelation, allegation or set of circumstances which threatens the integrity, reputation, or survival of an individual or organisation.
Barton & Coombs (1999) (from Coombs & Hollady 2006)	"An incident that has the potential to disrupt organizational operations and potentially destroy the organization."
Pauchant & Mitroff (1992)	"A disruption that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its basic assumptions, its subjective sense of self, its existential core."
Faulkner (2001)	a situation "where the root cause of an event is, to some extent, self-inflicted through such problems as inept management structures and practices or a failure to adapt to change."
Coombs (2007)	"A sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat"
Chong (2004)	"Negative incidents that can cause the demise of an organization"
Parsons (1996)	"Unexpected and brief with few managers possessing either first-hand knowledge or practical experience"
Mitroff Shrivastava & Udwadia (1987)	"Disasters precipitated by people, organizational structures, economics, and/or technology that cause extensive damage to human life and natural and social environments"

Pearson and Clair (1998) identify five commonalities of a crisis. First, when it arrives, a crisis tends to be a highly ambiguous situation where causes and effects tend to be unknown. Second, crises occur often and take many forms, potentially harmful to the company (see also, Dutton & Jackson 1987; Shrivastava et al. 1988). Third, a crisis offers little time for the company to respond (see also, Quarantelli 1988). Fourth, a crisis can surprise organizational members (see also, Hermann 1963). Finally, a crisis presents a dilemma that will require the organization to decide, often with uncertainty about the outcome of the decision they make.

A crisis can be self-inflicted or externally provoked (Sapriel 2003). The first occurs when the organization itself causes a crisis. Self-inflicted crises tend to be the ones that scholars give more significant focus on, perhaps due to their widespread occurrence. For instance, 78% of public relations crises are caused by communications and marketing errors from companies (Holmes 2017). As this suggests, self-inflicted crises are commonplace, and they further include crises provoked by company executives when decisions or actions are questionable and cause harm. Although many self-inflicted crises occur on a small scale with only minor damage to individuals or firms, there are also large-scale crises that firms bring upon themselves. These large-scale crises can be devastating for brands. For example, the top ten product recall crises in history cost each firm well over a billion U.S. dollars. The largest is Takata's airbag recall, which began in 2008 and is estimated to cost over 24 billion dollars (Burrows 2018). External crises happen outside of the organization compared to self-inflicted crises, but that subsequently impact the organization (Sapriel 2003). In addition to human-induced crises, many external crises are caused by nature, such as crises caused by extreme weather, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tsunamis. These events often have significant impacts, and even their aftermaths can provoke the need for years of recovery. The focus of our work, Covid-19, is one of the most dramatic and far-reaching external crises ever encountered.

Several scholars have provided classifications for crises (Sapriel 2003; Coombs 2007; Burnett 1998). Pearson and Clair (1998) provide an array of these crises, including self-inflicted as well as a few externally provoked crises, i.e., natural disasters (Table 2.2)

Table 2.2 An Array of Organizational Crises

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extortion • Hostile takeover • Product tampering • Vehicular fatality • Copyright infringement • Environmental spill • Computer tampering • Security breach • Executive kidnaping • Product/service boycott • Work-related homicide • Malicious rumor • Natural disaster that disrupts a major product or service • Natural disaster that destroys organizational information base 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bribery • Information sabotage • Workplace bombing • Terrorist attack • Plant explosion • Sexual harassment • Escape of hazardous materials • Personnel assault • Assault of customers • Product recall • Counterfeiting • Natural disaster that destroys corporate headquarters • Natural disaster that eliminates key stakeholders
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Source: Screenshot from Pearson & Clair (1998) Table 1

Coombs (2007) identifies three types of crises, victim, accidental, and preventable (table 2.3). This classification system is based on classifying crises based on attributions of the cause of a crisis, as well as identifying the victims of each crisis type.

Table 2.3 SCCT crisis Classifications

Table 1: SCCT crisis types by crisis clusters
<p>Victim cluster: In these crisis types, the organization is also a victim of the crisis. (Weak attributions of crisis responsibility = Mild reputational threat)</p> <p><i>Natural disaster:</i> Acts of nature damage an organization such as an earthquake. <i>Rumor:</i> False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated. <i>Workplace violence:</i> Current or former employee attacks current employees onsite. <i>Product tampering/Malevolence:</i> External agent causes damage to an organization.</p> <p>Accidental cluster: In these crisis types, the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional. (Minimal attributions of crisis responsibility = Moderate reputational threat)</p> <p><i>Challenges:</i> Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner. <i>Technical-error accidents:</i> A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident. <i>Technical-error product harm:</i> A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled.</p> <p>Preventable cluster: In these crisis types, the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation. (Strong attributions of crisis responsibility = Severe reputational threat)</p> <p><i>Human-error accidents:</i> Human error causes an industrial accident. <i>Human-error product harm:</i> Human error causes a product to be recalled. <i>Organizational misdeed with no injuries:</i> Stakeholders are deceived without injury. <i>Organizational misdeed management misconduct:</i> Laws or regulations are violated by management. <i>Organizational misdeed with injuries:</i> Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur.</p>

Source: Screenshot from Coombs (2007) Table 1

These classification systems illustrate that many crises are created by people, whether internal to the firm or by agents from outside the firm. Some of the external crises inflicted by

humans can have widespread consequences. When turmoil leads to government collapse or takeovers, regional conflicts pour into a nation. As evidenced by events over the past few decades, the scale of these human-caused crises truly has changed for the worse: “For the first time in history, human-induced crises have the potential to rival natural disasters in both scope and magnitude... For instance, major crises such as Chernobyl and Exxon Valdez, as well as the oil spills and fires during the Gulf War, affected large regions of the globe” (Pearson & Mitroff 1993, p. 48). These human-induced crises continue to occur, often with consequences of immense financial costs and irreparable harm to individuals, communities, or even nations (Snyder 1983; Benson 1988; Olaniran et al. 2012; Liu et al. 2017).

The fact that crises of all kinds, from those impacting single businesses to crises impacting the entire world, continue to occur makes it no surprise that there is extensive crisis management literature. This literature provides guidance and road maps for preparing for and weathering crises. Several studies for crisis management show how communities, cities, and the public/private sectors have responded to crises and its effects on consumers. (Evans & Elphick 2005; Mikulic et al. 2018; Blake & Sinclair 2003; Tse Stella & Sin 2006; Leung & Lam 2004; Henderson & Ng 2004; Peters & Pikkemaat 2004). Ultimately, understanding crises are only part of the story. A more important matter is how organizations conduct themselves during a crisis. This understanding is where crisis management enters the discussion. Crisis management is the focus of the next part of the literature review.

2.2 Crisis Management

“Nobody plans to fail. They just fail to plan.”—Anon

Many disciplines have studied crisis management (Pearson & Clair 1998), with political science being at the front and center of this work in the early years (Burnett 1998). Today, crisis management research is associated with politics/governments, the military, numerous business contexts, and schools/universities. Indeed, research can be found associated with nearly any institutional setting. Beyond the many journals dedicated to crisis management, field-specific journals often have articles focused on crises and crisis management. The extensive research on crisis management is nearly always accompanied by calls for strategic and holistic crisis management planning (Mikulic et al. 2018). The central idea is preparations for crises advantage

organizations when crises occur. This advantage means that prepared organizations are more alert to crisis signals and can more swiftly understand the strategic options available to the organization for dealing with a crisis and how to bring organizational resources into play to handle a crisis.

The most basic crisis management description comes from Coombs' (2007) comment that crisis management is "what management says and does after a crisis" (p.164). Bundy et al. (2016) provide a more detailed definition, describing crisis management as "a systematic attempt by organizational members ... to avert crises or to effectively manage those that do occur" (p.1663). By having crisis management strategies, firms become more capable of navigating through crises, making it possible for them to emerge more robust and more quickly than when methods are lacking.

Some of the earliest studies on crisis management were studies of responses to natural disasters. However, because these disasters were considered "an act of God," there was the belief that there was no way to control or prepare for them, leading to a loss of interest in this direction for crisis management research (Elliot, Harris & Baron 2005). Meanwhile, industrial "accidents" in North America, Asia, and Europe during the 1970s and 1980s increased the awareness that many crises were not acts of God; they were consequences of "industrial processes and the decisions made by managers controlling them" (Elliot, Harris & Baron 2005, p.337). Since the 1980s, organizational crisis management studies have been the main focus of researchers, growing our understanding of crises and crisis management across more and more contexts.

Although examinations of internal crises and how firms manage these kinds of crises have been a regular part of crisis management literature, in the early 2000s, examining the impacts of external crises, i.e., those beyond administrative control, began appearing in the literature. Ritchie (2004) discusses how globalization increased concern for external crises, including crises in particular countries spill over into neighbouring countries or even far distant lands. As just one recent example, a massive vessel blocking the Suez Canal for nearly a week in March 2021, disrupted global supply chains and created a crisis for many companies (The Associated Press 2021). Today, crisis management research is essential for providing information about the effects of crises on organizations and the strategies best suited for being prepared and capable of dealing with them.

Despite the volume of research focused on preparing for crises and planning how to engage through crises, organizations remain vulnerable to internal and external crises (Pearson & Clair 1998; Wang & Belardo 2005). Scholars repeatedly assert that it is essential to continue studying crisis management strategies because crises are inevitable, and the cost of poor crisis management is enormous. These costs include a severe impact on corporate profits, unwanted public and government scrutiny, damage to corporate integrity and name, unproductive diversion of employees' time and capital, and damaging employee morale (Burnett 1998). As seems apparent, there is justification for "investment in crisis preparations, due to the high costs to organizations in terms of financial losses, fatalities and missed market opportunities" (Elliot Harris & Baron 2005, p.337).

Tsang (2000), recognizing that crises are unavoidable, asserts that when companies fail to have crisis management plans in place, there is a risk that crises will result in "slash(ed) stock values and escalate(d) operating costs, causing both short- and long-term financial losses," as well as "damage (to) a company's reputation and diminish(ed) consumer confidence" (p.3). Regardless of whether a crisis is self-inflicted or caused by external conditions beyond the organization's control, it is essential to have a crisis management plan (Burnett 1998).

Across crisis management literature, there is the common expectation that management seeks to handle a crisis in such a manner as to either avert the crisis or to emerge from a crisis with the least resultant harm. Typical definitions of crisis management (Table 2.4) include the thought that crisis management is about choosing strategies across the phases of a crisis life cycle. This approach appears to allow organizations to better conduct themselves from the onset to the end of a crisis. The aim is to make better decisions in how to adapt and respond despite not being able to control the crisis itself.

Scholars agree that one of the first things to do in crisis management is to identify how a perceived crisis will likely impact the organization. Comfort (2007 p. 189) asserts that "a critical component of emergency response is cognition—that is, the capacity to recognize the degree of emerging risk to which a community is exposed and to act on that information."

Table 2.4 Crisis Management Definitions

Author(s)	Context (if specified)	Crisis Management
Pearson and Mitroff (1993)	Not specified	Five phases: (i) signal detection, (ii) preparation/prevention, (iii) containment/damage limitation, (iv) recovery, and (v) learning
Darling (1994)	International business	“Appropriate information systems, planning procedures, and decision-making techniques... includes the capability to describe the firm’s current situation and to make solid projections about its future... An ongoing planning process that includes alternatives and contingencies is a major element in determining an organization’s ability to respond.”
Pearson & Clair (1998)	General	“When potential crises are averted or when key stakeholders believe that the success outcomes of short- and long-range impacts of crises outweigh the failure outcomes.”
Elsubbaugh, Fildes, & Rose (2004).	Crisis preparation in crisis prone industries outside the West	“A favorable culture to aid crisis management (values and beliefs); detection of early warning signal; creation of an efficient information flow; mobilization and implementation of resources; strategic adoption to aid crisis management; speeding up of decisions.”
Comfort (2007)	Intergovernmental	“A dynamic interorganizational system that is characterized by four primary decision points: (1) detection of risk, (2) recognition and interpretation of risk for the immediate context, (3) communication of risk to multiple organizations in a wider region, and (4) self-organization and mobilization of a collective, community response system.”
Bundy, et al (2016)	Not Specified	“A systematic attempt by organizational members with external stakeholders to avert crises or to effectively manage those that do occur.”

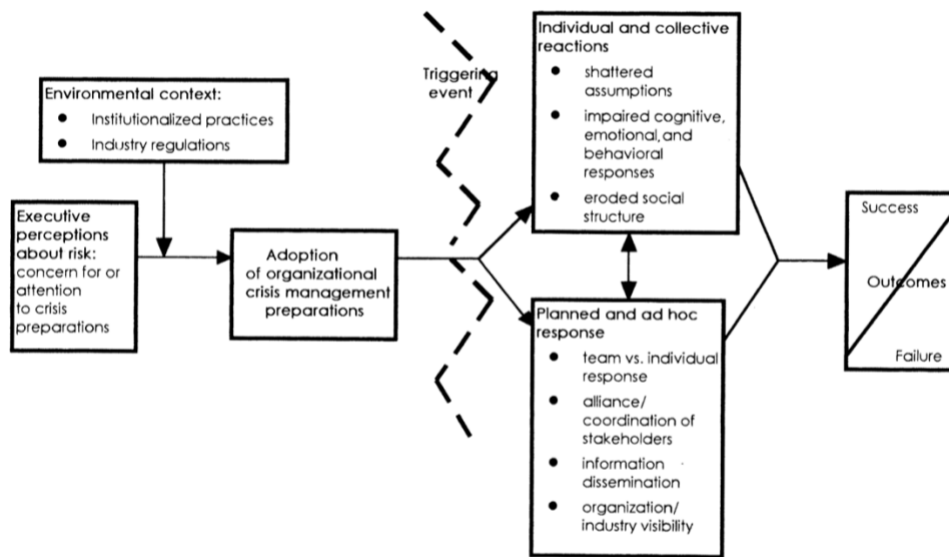
Collectively, crisis management studies identify and analyze lessons learned while improving our understanding of crisis management strategies. A common theme is that having crisis management strategies advantages organizations (Burnett 1998; Pearson & Clair 1998; Elliot Harris & Baron 2005; Wang & Belardo 2005; Mikulic et al. 2018; Ritchie 2004; Heath 1998; Bowonder & Lin-stone 1987; Pauchant & Mitroff 1992). While there does not seem to be one strategy that works for every crisis (Burnett 1998), there are commonalities in recommendations, suggesting that the essential characteristics of effective crisis management

may be universal. These universalities can be found in crisis management frameworks and recommended processes for dealing with crises. As Burnett (1998) explains, “These frameworks, which begin with the variable identification and relationship specification processes necessary for strategy determination, offer much greater potential than either case analyses or prescriptive studies for furthering our understanding of, and ability to manage, organizational crises.” The frameworks, by providing processes, enable institutions to work systematically through a crisis.

Pearson and Clair (1998) explain that when crisis management strategies are successful, they usually mean that firms can maintain operations, with organizational and external stakeholder losses minimized. Pearson and Clair (1998) further advocate that lessons from a crisis should be applied improve how to deal with future crises.

Some authors create a holistic picture of how organizations should be prepared to develop the strategies needed for crises that they will face (Pearson & Clair 1998; Heath 1998; Bowonder & Lin-stone 1987; Pauchant & Mitroff 1992). Pearson and Clair (1998) assert that to have the best macro system for crisis management, psychological, social-political, and technological-structural issues should be explicitly considered and integrated into managing crises. They provide a process model illustrating the logic underlying the relationships between variables (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 Crisis Management Process

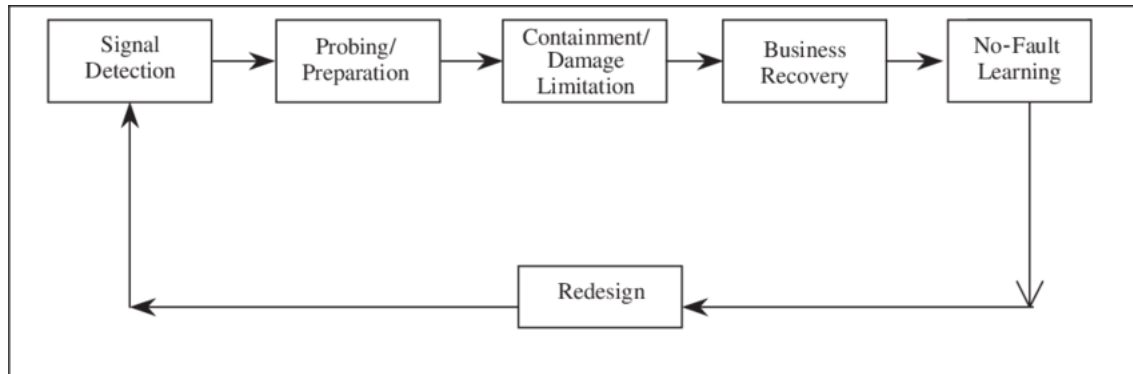


Source: *The Crisis Management Process* (Pearson & Clair 1998) Figure 1

Heath (1998) similarly focuses on the ideas of preparedness, response, and recovery, with added attention to the concept of prevention to limit the risks and threats associated with a crisis. Heath (1998) also comments that, unfortunately, many organizations tend to not plan for a crisis, leaving management with a lack of preparation and planning that leads to suboptimal crisis solutions, as well as considerable stress on leadership as they work to navigate crises as they emerge.

Mitroff's (1993) model is the most cited crisis management model (Pearson & Mitroff 1993). This crisis management model has five stages, each with behaviours that enable a firm to limit the damages of a crisis as much as possible while learning to improve responses to future crises. As with other process-orientated models, the model (Figure 2.2) "focuses on how organizations can eliminate vulnerabilities to a crisis that they encounter at different stages of a crisis life cycle" (Wang & Belardo 2005, p.9).

Figure 2.2 The Crisis Management Five Step Circle



Source: *The Crisis Management Process* (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993) Exhibit 3

One of the most critical aspects of this model is that it “incorporates the concept of ‘Learning,’ which is crucial if organizations improve their chances of surviving the next crisis. Learning from previous experiences would help organizations minimize uncertainty about similar business crises and help familiarize crisis managers with the difficulties they may face and need to address” (Wang & Belardo 2005, p.3). As this description suggests, crisis management is not just about the planning and executing of the strategy. Learning is crucial so that organizations can develop systems and processes for handling future crises. In this manner, Wang and Belardo (2005) assert that knowledge management strategies need to be part of crisis management planning. Organizations analyze the processes and outcomes of a crisis to determine how well they responded. By having these learning elements in place, organizations can learn from the real crisis “help(ing) organizations minimize uncertainty about similar business crises and help familiarize crisis managers with the difficulties they may face and need to address” (Wang & Belardo 2005, p.3).

From the above, there should be a sense that crisis management scholars have considerable overlap in their explanations of processes required for effective crisis management. One of the most frequently seen crisis management perspectives, which also incorporates learning, is the three-phase crisis management strategy, elaborated next.

2.2.1 The Three-Phase Crisis Management Strategy

Many scholars use a three-phase framework to identify and organize their recommendations for crisis management. In the first phase (pre-crisis), there is advice for preparedness in the absence of crisis. In the second (the crisis), there is advice for how to engage when confronted with crisis. Finally, there is advice for post-crisis recovery and restabilizing (post-crisis). Table 2.5 provides a summary of the content/guidance across the process of a crisis. The table includes eleven of the most cited crisis management works and the elements within each phase discussed by each author. As can be seen, each of the sub-activities within the phases can improve the capabilities of institutions to handle crises more effectively.

Table 2.5 The Three Phase Crisis Management Strategy

Three-phase Crisis Management strategy and actions within each phase	Authors										
	Pearson & Clair (1998)	Pearson & Mitroff (1993)	Mitroff, Shrivastava, & Udvardi (1987)	Coombs (2007)	Veil (2011)	Sheaffer & Mano -Negrin (2003)	Preble (1997)	Parsons (1996)	Richardson (1994)	Chong (2004)	Burnett (1998)
Pre-Crisis											
Environmental scanning	√	√	√					√	√	√	√
Information Gathering			√								√
Issue Analysis/ Dissemination	√										
Developing strategies	√	√	√	√				√		√	√
Scenario analysis	√		√	√				√			√
Developing “crisis management” team or department				√					√	√	√
Crisis containment/ prevention	√	√		√						√	

The Crisis										
Crisis Awareness			√							
Deciding on the best strategy quickly				√					√	
Unified organizational culture	√				√					√
Strategy Implementation			√	√			√	√		√
Flexible strategy changes						√		√	√	
Well-structured crisis management team				√	√			√		√
Stakeholder involvement				√				√		√
Efficient and honest crisis communication	√			√		√	√	√		√
Post Crisis										
Prepare recovery strategy		√	√							
Implementing recovery strategy		√	√				√			√
Receiving Feedback (from stakeholders)						√		√		√
Creating lessons to learn from		√	√	√	√			√		√
Communication to all stakeholders				√						√
Redesign strategy		√	√	√	√			√		√

Numerous authors have placed the three-phase strategy within crisis timelines, providing a discussion of how a crisis can play out (Elliot Harris & Baron 2005; Heath 1998; Evans & Elphick 2005; Ritchie 2004; Wang & Belardo 2005). Through each phase, authors tend to provide recommendations for preparing for, dealing with, and recovering from crises. The first phase, often called the "pre-crisis" phase, refers to the preparation and planning phase (Ritchie 2004; Kash & Darling 1998; Elliot Harris & Baron 2005; Evans & Elphick 2005; Harrison 2000). This phase is considered the most important as it is about planning and developing strategies for tackling a crisis before it happens (Heath 1998). It calls for organizations to take a proactive stance, with frequent environmental scans to keep the organization alert to any potential crisis events that could impact the organization.

Being proactive includes contingency planning, issues analysis, scenario analysis, information gathering, and dissemination (Ritchie 2004; Pearson & Mitroff 1993) to prepare the

organization for handling a crisis (Ritchie 2004; Kash & Darling 1998). This phase "prevents a loss of control before a crisis happens, prevents further loss of control when a crisis arises, and when and where (it is) possible (to) regain control when loss of control happens" (Heath 1998).

Failure to plan for crisis events can lead organizational members to become less confident when crises arise. Additionally, responsive strategies to a crisis can lead to worse consequences than what would typically happen if there was a plan (Elliot, Harris & Baron 2005). Not having a plan can cause employees to lose confidence in leaders, leading to significant psychological problems for employees such as panic, anxiety, and depression. In turn, this could result in employees not performing to the best of their abilities (Pearson & Clair 1998). In sum, energies spent by organizations in planning and preparation for crises allow organizations to more successfully navigate these situations, reducing damage to the organization and increasing the prospect of realizing benefits from a crisis.

The next phase is when the crisis occurs, and organizations choose one of their pre-conceived strategies, which seems to offer the best response (Ritchie 2004; Elliot Harris & Baron 2005; Evans & Elphick 2005). Ritchie (2004) terms this phase as strategic implementation, where "If managers are aware of the impending crisis or disaster (through proactive scanning in the pre-crisis phase) and have developed contingency or emergency planning procedures, they can implement strategies to limit the damage of a crisis on business and society." The main aim of this phase is to reduce or eliminate the damage that the crisis can bring to the organization (Smith 1990). Through the actions of their managers or crisis management team, organizations face the crisis head-on by choosing among their strategic options and implementing the strategy. Doing so saves response time since it is not where strategy is developed but where it is implemented.

The threat and impact of crises can change throughout a crisis, requiring organizations to be highly flexible in changing their strategies. These decisions are based on their ongoing scan of the environment and interpretation of the situation confronting them in real-time (Ritchie 2004). Because of the constantly changing nature of crises, it is essential to realize that a balance must be struck between making decisions quickly and pausing long enough to avoid taking actions too quickly that might ultimately cause detrimental effects to the organization (Evans & Elphick 2005). That is why managers need to have several strategies ready to have options available, which allows them to make better decisions as more information becomes available.

In this phase, organizations are advantaged by having a solid and well-structured crisis management team and crisis containment capabilities to implement strategies efficiently. They also need to know the importance of excellent crisis communication (Evans & Elphick 2005). Efficient and honest communication is essential across all stakeholders so that as strategies are implemented, stakeholders, particularly employees, are clear about the direction and intentions of the organization (Coombs 2007). Inconsistent communication can make it seem as though the organization does not know what they are doing and can cause stakeholders to lose trust when the organization needs it most (Pearson & Clair 1998; Coombs 2007).

The final phase of the strategy is the post-crisis phase. At this point, the focus shifts from implementation to feedback and learning (Ritchie 2004; Elliot Harris & Baron 2005; Evans & Elphick 2005; Wang & Belardo 2005). Effective feedback loops require good communication with all internal and external stakeholders, including the media (Regeister & Larkin 2010; Evans & Elphick 2005; Coombs 2007). This feedback makes it possible for the organization to have more significant learning from the crisis, using those lessons learned to improve their crisis management strategies (Evans & Elphick; 2005). This sense of a "feedback loop" is essential given that by learning from a crisis, organizations are more likely to have good strategic responses and successful recoveries during future crises (Ritchie 2004; Evans & Elphick 2005; Elliot Harris & Baron 2005). Communication in this phase is essential because reputation and morale can be directly affected by the effects of communication on stakeholders (Seymour and Moore 2000).

In sum, the three-phase crisis strategy has been recommended by numerous scholars. The three-phase crisis strategy incorporates actions within each phase, providing a roadmap for dealing with crises from beginning to end. This framework is a complete loop, encouraging continuous learning. While improvements in crisis management are expected by using this system, post-crisis reviews suggest that "any crisis process results in relative degrees of success and failure. No organization will respond in a manner that is completely effective or completely ineffective" (Pearson & Clair 1998). Burnett (1998) further suggests that post-crisis effects include the emergence of heroes (crisis champions), accelerated organizational changes for the positive (or negative), latent problems faced and possibly resolved, people changed, new strategies and new competitive advantages identified, early warning systems developed, and more. This means organizations can create opportunities to make themselves better, even in the

face of adversity. Realizing this potential requires thinking full circle, beginning with being strategically prepared for crises (Pearson & Clair 1998; Burnett 1998; Evans & Elphick 2005; Elliot Harris & Baron 2005; Wang & Belardo 2005).

A number of theories have been used in crisis management literature. The theories applied to the papers in Table 2.5 include Stakeholder theory (Pearson & Clair 1998), Social-Political Theory (Pearson & Clair 1998), Organization and Management theory (Pearson & Clair 1998), Psychoanalytic theory (Pearson & Clair 1998), Trauma theory (Pearson & Clair 1998), theory of personality (Pearson & Clair 1998), Attribution theory (Coombs 2007), image restoration theory (Coombs 2007), Situational crisis communication theory (Coombs 2007; Veil 2011), and strategic management theory (Richardson 1994). The widely varying theories applied to crises may be due to the fact that crises and crisis management have been examined across so many fields, with each field bringing their preferred theoretical lenses to bear on the issues.

Just over ten years ago, Alpaslan, Green and Mitroff (2009) called for a “stakeholder theory of “crisis management”. Their work summarized crisis management as having “...two broad phases. In the preparation phase, organizations aim to identify and interact with stakeholders... In the response phase, organizations aim to minimize stakeholders’ losses” (p. 40). The authors provide a summary of the principle underlying the model:

“the fundamental principle of the stakeholder model, that all stakeholders have intrinsic value, facilitates the forming of alliances and the sharing of accurate information with the organization’s stakeholders, and hence, coordinates the organization’s and its stakeholders’ crisis preparation and response more efficiently and effectively than relying on contracts...” (p. 44).

2.2.2 Crisis Management and COVID-19

Although the present crisis struck the world just eighteen months ago, a growing body of crisis management research focused on the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of this work has focused on government responses. In contrast, several papers focus on how health departments, medical centres, and infectious disease agencies manage and adapt to the severe conditions the crisis has imposed on them. There is also a growing literature from the business sector, particularly sectors most hit by the crisis, such as tourism and hospitality. A few examples of this work follow, giving a sense of the advice and recommendations to manage this crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in scope, demanding that organizations take many actions to create the best environment to handle the COVID-19 crisis as effectively as possible. Stewart (2020) stresses the importance of understanding risk and uncertainty and the differences between them that the COVID-19 crisis makes evident. Risk is associated with outcomes of a crisis that could happen when choosing a course of action (Stewart 2020). For example, a government deciding on what types of regulations to enact in their country, province, or city comes with risk whenever it comes to public health and the economy. Uncertainty is the fact that we are unsure of the crisis outcomes, leading us to have feelings of anxiety and fear concerning our decision choices (Stewart 2020). It is recommended that crisis management teams be aware of these differences as they review their strategic options. For example, when dealing with the risks involved with COVID strategies, risk assessments, scenario planning, and scenario analysis would be valuable to use, which is also recommended in the crisis management literature. The uncertainties of the pandemic can be problematic for consumers. It is recommended to communicate to consumers through marketing messages that the business is working to take care of its customers (Stewart 2020).

Diving deeper into the concept of uncertainty, Durodié (2020) provides an analysis of what uncertainty looks like in this pandemic, arguing that each country dealing with the crisis views it through its own national (political, social, and cultural) lenses. The result is that each country, province/state, city, and culture(s) therein, are handling the COVID-19 pandemic differently, with Durodié (2020) adding that "ultimately, each country will have to steer its path through these uncertainties and ambiguities." At the organization level, the recommendation is to make decisions formed by its culture and its "core beliefs" (Durodié 2020).

When dealing with a crisis as big as a global pandemic, it is not ideal to be stressed or anxious while creating crisis strategies. Being aware of mental health is essential when dealing with any crisis (Durodié & Wainright 2019). That is why Traschler and Jong (2020) advocate for the emphasis of self-regulation and other mental health self-care practices for managers dealing with the crisis, offering the logic that just like high-performance athletes need to train and take care of their mental health to have peak performance when dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Doing so will allow managers to create the best strategies throughout this time while maintaining their health during this process (Traschler & Jong 2020).

Responding to business actions witnessed from the COVID-19 pandemic, Dobrowolski (2020) points out that crisis management literature often asserts that a crisis should not be looked at as an event. Instead, it should be looked at as a process that can change rapidly. Dobrowolski argues that COVID-19 exposes the fact that organizations need to continually scan the external environment for any news/events happening, even events in far corners of the world. Dobrowolski (2020) recommends proactive approaches, including making continuous scanning for cues in the news a top priority for organizations. He further recommends using the three-phase crises structure to handle a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a structure embedded into an organization should make firms better suited for early triggering event identification and ensuing response actions.

In just a few months following the global recognition of the COVID-19 pandemic, reports began emerging of the crisis management efforts by nations and health systems. Among the world's nations, South Korea has been seen as an exemplar for effective response. Their response provides "administrative insights and practical implications for other countries" (Lee et al. 2020, p. 733). Earlier confrontations with outbreaks (e.g., SARS) led South Korea to take steps to be more prepared for if/when similar crises occurred. When COVID-19 struck, South Korea was able to speedily take "adaptive and decisive approaches supported by cognition, coordination, communication, and control—four Cs of emergency and crisis management" (Lee et al. 2020, p.733). It recognized the emerging risk before the crisis occurred, intervened swiftly and effectively, and undertook innovative actions" (Lee et al. 2020 p. 732). Preparedness through learning reminds organizations of the importance of being able "to adapt their form and functioning to the nature of the public problems they seek to address" (Mayne et al. 2020, p. 34). As Mayne et al. suggest, there is an ever-present need to fully appreciate the nature of the crisis confronting the organization while also learning and adapting continuously.

Out of the sectors hardest hit, health systems have been the focus of several papers. Attesting to the need for all facets of health systems to adapt swiftly, a Canadian study of cancer centres' responses to COVID-19 led Rittberg et al. (2020 p.233) to report: "Canadian cancer centres underwent a rapid and aggressive transformation of services in response to COVID-19." These transformations were facilitated by extensive ongoing communication and coordinated response at the national level between provinces and nations. As these cases indicate, health systems have responded quickly and on a large scale to confront the pandemic. Steier and

Moxham (2020) affirm that containment required "quick resource re-allocation on a large scale... prioritized on every level of healthcare delivery." Commonalities exist in crisis management, including having well-invested healthcare systems affording capacity for pandemics; keeping organizational memory of the standard operating procedures that were innovatively applied to the crisis; "and creat(ing) a hierarchy of priorities, set(ing) goals for achievements (short-, mid-and long-term)" (Steier & Maxham 2020). Health system policymakers and medical centre staff, and physicians continue learning about the most effective crisis management strategies for future pandemics.

Navarro et al. (2020) examine how orthopedic systems responded to and emerge through the pandemic. The idea of the potentiality for a pandemic transitioned swiftly to reality, and soon "drastic measures were taken, sometimes within hours, to dramatically alter routine processes" (Navarro et al. 2020). The authors report on the critical role of leadership and open communication. Health care systems then endured the waves of the pandemic, requiring unprecedented responses. In their conclusion, the authors report on the "accelerated innovation that is associated with the response to this pandemic" (p. 7); these innovations may be changing the future of healthcare delivery.

One of the industries that has been the most affected by the pandemic is tourism. As countries were in lockdown and their citizens were not travelling, hotel businesses were affected the most as no travelers were coming to their business. They had to find a way to survive as they waited for their customers to come to their business again after the vaccine. Lei & Phi (2020) used a framework by Israeli and Reichel (2003) based on hospitality crisis management practices to see if hotel managers used these practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. The hotel managers' perception at the beginning of the pandemic was that business would go back to normal within a few weeks (Lei & Phi 2020). However, once the US went into lockdown and the months went on, they knew that their operations would change drastically (Lei & Phi 2020). Many business departments suffered, from operations to marketing, to human resources (Lei & Phi 2020).

2.3 Crises and Professional Sports

Professional sports have endured more than their fair share of crises, and these crises have had varying degrees of potential harm to organizations, players, fans, and even communities. These crises have attracted considerable attention given the public nature of professional sports. So, it would come as no surprise that researchers have examined how professional sports teams and leagues manage crises. We will now discuss professional sports and crises, crisis management, professional sports and the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Brown-Devlin and Brown (2020) establish a typology of crises in sports with three categories: Environmental/Individual Crisis, Rules and Norms Violations, and Organizational Mismanagement. While an “Act of God” event was among the eleven types of crises in their typology, nearly all other crises were self-inflicted. However, the “fan involvement issue” could be considered out of a team’s control. Although there are numerous examples of these self-inflicted crises, a recent Canadian model is presented for illustration. In 2018, several National Hockey League (NHL) players from the Ottawa Senators were in an Uber talking disparagingly about their coach (Johnston 2018). Unbeknown to them, their conversation was recorded and made public (Johnston 2018). The Senators responded by sending a legal notice to the media company that posted the recording, arguing that it violated provincial privacy laws. Several key players, including Matt Duchene, issued apologies. The crisis soon expanded beyond the team, with the league opening discussions regarding the need to show respect for coaching staff (Johnston 2018; Johnston & Freidman 2018).

Whereas self-inflicted crises in sports tend to impact individual teams, externally provoked crises affect entire leagues. Many would argue that when Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the American national anthem at a 2016 National Football League (NFL) regular-season game to protest police brutality, a crisis began for the NFL (JReidESPN 2017). Uncertainty about how fans were going to respond, what actions to take, and official positions on the crisis was apparent in the NFL’s handling of the matter (West 2020). There have also been crisis moments caused by market opportunities being misunderstood (Sapriel 2003). For instance, in 2001, the XFL was launched as a competitor to the National Football League. This league was almost immediately in crisis; a lack of understanding of the demands of the North American sports market led to the league shutting down after one season (Sanjay 2019).

Numerous externally provoked events have also impacted professional sports. One example is the 9/11 terror attacks that affected multiple leagues in North America; cancellation of games after the attacks was the immediate response while leagues and teams developed crisis management responses (DeNatale 2018). Strategies varied by the league; the PGA (Professional Golfers Association) tour cancelled the first round of the American Express Championship while the LGPA (Ladies Professional Golf Association) continued their tournament (Paulsen 2011). The effects of the 9/11 terrorist attack crisis continued long after the event as fans worried about security and safety at arenas, which had the cascading effect of reducing attendance. In this instance, leagues had to quickly create security plans to assure safety (DeNatale 2018), thereby providing needed reassurance to fans. Shortly after the terror attacks, the NFL commissioner met with government officials to determine if playing games was safe. Major League Baseball was also affected, with the World Series rescheduled from October to November, which was an “unprecedented” scheduling change (Paulsen 2011).

Of the leagues in the Big Four, the NFL has seen more than its share of crises. Although players kneeling for the American national anthem and how to respond to this behaviour has drawn a lot of attention and affected the entire league. Various scandal-related crises have occurred; one crisis has attracted considerable attention in recent years– the NFL’s handling of player safety and concussions. This crisis came to light in 2009 from a GQ article, with widespread attention following the release of the movie *Concussion*. Although concussions had always been part of the sport, the NFL now had to act, given national, even global attention (Lagree Wilbur and Cameron 2019).

2.4 Crisis Management & Professional Sports

Given the frequency of crisis events in professional sports, it could be expected that there would be research focused on this domain. As stated above, crises are inevitable, regardless of industry, and professional sports are not protected from crises. Research has been conducted on crises in professional sports, from the Tiger Woods scandal (Knittel & Stango 2014; Hood 2012; Kozman 2013) to the NFL concussion crisis (Kain 2009; Roser-Jones 2013), to the effects of 9/11 on sports (Kusz 2007; Scherer & Koch 2010), among many others. Focusing on just two of these crises illustrates the attention given to crisis management in professional sports.

The NFL concussion crisis could not be brushed aside or ignored as it grew in momentum and created negative perceptions of the league; this crisis associates with declines in attendance (Lagree Wilbur and Cameron 2019). Lagree, Wilbur and Cameron (2019) studied “the complexity and dynamics of the NFL concussion crisis to test the validity of the ICM (Integrated Crisis Mapping) model, paying particular attention to emotional response.” The ICM model developed by Jin et al. (2007) asserted that emotional responses are associated with coping strategies. Crisis management, particularly communications to stakeholders, should be informed by fan emotions. Lagree, Wilbur and Cameron (2019) found that “media exposure to the concussion issue will have an indirect effect on participants’ evaluations of corporate message credibility through feelings of anger.” They provide recommendations for marketers in choosing the proper framing for response to a crisis, engaging in PR practices with the crisis management team and monitoring crises as they unfold over time.

Research has also looked at how external crises have impacted professional sports and how leagues and teams have responded, one famously being the 9/11 terror attacks (Kusz 2007; Scherer & Koch 2010). These studies primarily look at the effects of these crises on professional sports, whether it be the financial, reputation, or marketing sides of the company.

The theories most used in professional sports literature on crisis management are image repair theory (Brown Devlin & Brown 2020), attribution theory (Brown Devlin & Brown 2020), agenda setting theory (Kozman 2013), attribute priming theory (Kozman 2013), framing theory (Kozman 2013), tortious battery theory (Roser-Jones 2013), political theory (Scherer & Koch 2010), appraisal theory in psychology (Lagree Wilbur & Cameron 2019), and contingency theory (Lagree Wilbur & Cameron 2019). However, along with research on crisis management and COVID-19, research in professional sports and crisis management has also used Coombs’ (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory in their research (Dobrowolski 2020; Lagree Wilbur & Cameron 2019). Similar to It is clear that these theories affectively inform how sports management thinks about crisis management.

2.4.1 Professional Sports and the COVID-19 Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the sports industry, affecting (all) professional sports activities (and even) the 2020 Summer Olympics –

Wang, Wang & Yoon 2021

As the above section suggests, professional sports have faced numerous crises, although none with the global impact or severity of COVID-19. The Brown-Devlin and Brown (2020) typology of sports crises never quite anticipated the scale of this particular “Act of God” crisis; these authors define “Act of God” crises as “actions that affect a sports figure or a team that were outside of his/her/its control.” Whereas this definition defines these crisis affecting figures or teams, COVID-19 not only affected entire leagues, but the industry itself.

As word of the pandemic spread during the early months of 2020, the major North American leagues eyed the pandemic with cautious attention. Still, they hoped that it would not reach North America or would be contained before impacting sports. But, on March 11th, 2020, Rudy Gobert of the Utah Jazz of the National Basketball Association (NBA) tested positive for COVID-19 while on a road trip game in Oklahoma City (Young 2020). Moments after the announcement to the team, the game scheduled that night against the Thunder was cancelled (Young 2020). Hours after this game stopped, the entire league announced a pause of the season (NBA 2020). This pause was a catalyst across the whole world of professional sports. Leagues were thrown into crisis management, seeking to understand and adapt to the quickly changing environment as an influx of new information on the crisis came their way (Zucker 2020). As suggested earlier, top-tier professional sports have characteristics enabling them to make different decisions through the crisis than might be available to second-tier sports.

The NFL was not in season when the pandemic started, so they had time to continue scanning the environment and plan for operations as the fall 2020 season approached. The league has television deals with CBS, NBC, and Fox, generating about 3 billion dollars from each television broadcaster (LWOSports 2020). Along with television, the league earns over 1 billion dollars in corporate sponsors through various activities such as stadium names, commercials, advertisement space in games, and streaming activities (LWOSports, 2020). Of course, the NFL also generates money through ticket sales. However, that portion is comparatively tiny, as the team with the most consistent high attendance, the Green Bay Packers, earns 70 million dollars annually in ticket sales (LWOSports 2020). Another example of the revenue streams for top-tier professional sports is the NBA’s television deal estimated at three billion dollars. Then there are sponsorships and lucrative contracts with their athletes and merchandise companies (Nath 2020). Approximately 3.6 billion (40% of the NBA’s revenue)

comes from game day sales through tickets, concessions, and parking (West 2020). Similarly, both MLB and the NHL have substantial television deals and sponsorships, leading them to rely less on attendance on game days for financial survival than second-tier professional sports leagues.

Two of the Big Four leagues' seasons were abruptly stopped in the middle of March 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic forced an aggressive response. The NBA and the NHL chose to finish their seasons, developing bubble-style playoff runs in the summer and fall of 2020. The NBA brought 22 of their 30 teams to the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Florida, where the rest of the scheduled regular-season games, along with the post-season games, were played (ESPN 2020; Kaplan & Wyshynski 2020). The NFL launched their 2020 season in late summer with rigorous regimens of team testing for COVID-19 and to mostly empty stadiums, although some state guidelines permitted a small number of fans at games (Patra 2020).

As the Big Four worked to keep the prospects of competitive seasons viable, while other professional sports leagues had more significant struggles. In the Canadian Football League (CFL), where 55% of their revenue comes from game-day attendance tickets and concessions (PostMedia 2020), planning for a season with the likelihood of zero attendance was problematic. As the league could not find a way to hold a safe season, cancelling the season for the 2020 year became a necessity. To remain viable, the CFL also requested 150 million dollars for assistance from the Canadian government, but was denied that request (Postmedia 2020). The CFL 2021 season will begin on August 5th, about a one-month delayed schedule from a regularly scheduled season.

Decisions at the onset of the pandemic were often affected by the stage of the season. For second-tier leagues in the middle of their season, the pandemic forced a stoppage, which was the case for the Major League of Rugby (MLR) and the National Lacrosse League (NLL) (Davidson 2020; NLL 2020). Those not yet in operations had time to determine a way to have a season despite the pandemic. The Canadian Elite Basketball League (CEBL) successfully created a bubble-style tournament in St. Catherine's, Ontario, for a shortened season (CEBL 2020).

With no fans in stadiums, professional sports have lost significant, even vital, ticket sales. However, while the top-tier professional sports leagues have been able to find safe ways to run seasons without fans and maintain revenue streams, second-tier leagues have been in much more

complex situations. These second-tier leagues are continuing to seek ways to find stability for the challenging year ahead.

With the COVID-19 pandemic now in its fifteenth month and with professional sports continuing to have significant uncertainties about when and how to launch and run seasons in 2021 – 2022 safely, crisis management is the norm across all professional sports. The damage that this pandemic has caused to the professional sports industry and its importance in teams and leagues having crisis management strategies to survive during this challenging time makes it essential that crisis management research focuses on this issue.

2.4.2 Professional Sports COVID-19 Crisis Management Research

Already, several studies have been looking at the effects the COVID-19 pandemic has in professional sports. Studies of the crisis management activities, processes, and coping strategies by professional sports through this crisis are beginning to be published (DiFiori et al. 2020; Horky 2020; Hughes et al. 2020; Mohr et al. 2020). Studies have also looked at individual amateur athletic programs and how they should return in the COVID-19 era (Lollegen et al. 2020). When it comes to athlete programs, Lollegen et al. (2020) recommend that bringing athletes back onto the field should be examined on a case-by-case basis while relying on collaboration with doctors and medical staff to ensure a safe transition from lockdown to play (Lollegen et al. 2020).

European football has been the focal league for three COVID-19 crisis management papers (DiFiori et al. 2020; Horky 2020; Mohr et al. 2020). These studies primarily focus on recommendations for the safe resumption of play after lockdown restrictions lift, such as less people on location in practice sessions. Carmody, Murray, Brodina et al. (2020) gave predictions for how sports would come back. They predicted that restrictions would vary greatly depending on the state, province, and country. At the same time, new behaviors provoked by the pandemic, such as physical distancing and masks, will have to continue even when fans are allowed back inside arenas (Carmody, Murray & Brodina et al. 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends evaluating five critical factors in determining risk for bringing fans back to arenas. These factors are: if there's local transmission, single or multiple venues involved in the event, international participant involvement, participants developing a higher risk of COVID-19, and a higher risk of spread from the sport. Along with these factors from the WHO, the authors

recommend heavy involvement with local and national governments. They know the area well enough and have good information regarding virus transmission in the area.

Horky (2020) asserts that the financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on leagues will follow how swiftly leagues reopen. Using consumption capital theory (Stigler and Becker 1977), Horky suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic will cause heightened popularity in the sports league(s) that opens first, which will create a competitive advantage as more leagues return.

Parnell et al. (2020) analyzed mass gatherings post COVID-19 and the strategies recommended to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in gatherings. Through their analysis of the UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) 2020 Cup and other European Sports Leagues, they were surprised to find that sports leagues in Europe acted as a reference for indicating the scale of the pandemic's impact. Referencing their research from the WHO, the authors further asserted that the COVID-19 pandemic would affect the professional sports industry for a long time, including cancellations of sporting events, cancelling seasons, or even the demise of whole leagues (Parnell et al. 2020). These consequences led them to believe that the most important lesson to take from this experience is the importance of preparation (Parnell et al. 2020). If these leagues could better prepare for strategies to use when confronting the pandemic, then they could have found better ways to sustain themselves during this time. The result could have saved them from some damage to their leagues and teams (Parnell et al. 2020).

The literature review began by looking at crises, crisis management, and crisis management during COVID-19 from fields other than professional sports. The intent was to provide a foundation for understanding the depth and breadth of crisis research. We then turned to professional sports and, following the same path, we looked at literature in this domain related to crises, crisis management, and crisis management during COVID-19. From this point forward, COVID-19 is the focal point, with the following figure offering guideposts and perspectives for the research that follows.

Chapter Three: Methods

Qualitative research is used to explain human environments and experiences within a variety of frameworks (Hay 2016, p.5). Given that sport teams handling the COVID-19 pandemic deals with human experiences, qualitative research is ideal to use for this study. Further, when examining a unique particular event that has the characteristics of a bounded system with context-specific situations, the case study method is appropriate (Creswell 1998). COVID-19, crisis management, and professional sports are a unique situation that has not been looked at much in literature, so examining it through a case study is ideal to study this topic. Case studies have been defined by Creswell (1998) as "an exploration of a "bounded system" or a case (or multiple cases) over time through a detailed, in-depth data collection involving various sources of information-rich in context." This bounded system identifies the type of case studied by time and place and *the* case - a program, event, activity, or individual (Creswell 1998). In this case, the bounded system is the COVID-19 strategies of the NLL and their teams between December 2019-June 2021 in Canada and the United States. Research questions foundational to the case study can embrace different epistemological orientations of various kinds (Yin 2014). The most common type of epistemology seen is relativism, where the researcher believes that multiple realities exist (Yin 2014). When it comes to using this methodology, Patton (1990) states that case studies become particularly useful where "one wants to understand a particular problem or situation in great depth, and one can identify cases rich in information."

The research question states above is asking to understand the problem of the NLL where the in depth information is the what, how, and why they chose to act the way they did with the COVID-19 pandemic, which is why case study research is also ideal to answer this question. What distinguishes case studies from other methodologies is that case studies are context-specific. The researcher wants to know the "what" and "how" of a given case. The researcher then takes the information from the case and attempts to connect it to an existing theory.

3.1 Choosing the Right Case

The case study is ideal for this thesis because COVID-19 and professional sports present a context-specific and new domain. Conducting a case study while being grounded in extant crisis management literature provides opportunities to learn about crisis management in

professional sports teams in an extraordinary context. Before picking which type of case study to use, one must identify what kind of research question they are asking in their research, as questions that ask “why” or “how” work best with a case study.

Researchers should pick unusual cases that show different perspectives of a given problem, process, or event portrayed to create descriptive information that is unknown (Starman 2013). However, these cases should also be ordinary, accessible to the researcher and easily applicable in the real world (Starman 2013). Doing so is a balancing act for researchers to get the descriptive data to answer their research question and do so efficiently. Meanwhile, Yin (2009) encourages case study researchers to "be ambitious enough to try and select a significant or "special" case for your case study, as a more mundane case may not produce an acceptable study."

One of the factors making this an unusual and ambitious case to study is that the professional sports industry is limited in its ability to serve customers and earn revenue through the crisis. Many service- or product-based companies could make adaptations enabling them to fit the "pandemic consumer." The professional sports industry struggled with this, as their product depended on close contact between players and coaches while also needing fans in stadiums for revenue; each was an impossibility for nearly the entirety of the pandemic.

Yin (2014) classified three common case studies; explanatory, descriptive, and exploratory (Yin 2014). The decision on which case to use is based on the research question being asked (Yin 2014). When asking 'what' types of questions, Yin (2014) recommends that descriptive case studies are the best, and "how" and "why" questions match more with exploratory studies (Yin 2014).

The research question pursued in this research is: *what strategies have been used by professional sports leagues during the COVID-19 pandemic and how and why were these strategies chosen?* This question encompasses the intent of exploratory studies. Thus, this study is considered to be exploratory.

If cases can be bounded by either time or place, the boundaries make it easier to conduct the case study process (Creswell 1998; Yin 2009; Stake 1995). Doing so prevents disorganization when collecting and analyzing data, because having no boundaries can create a lot of information that would be difficult to organize in a chronological order. Doing so makes it less time-consuming for the researcher to analyze and interpret the data.

As stated above, time and place boundaries have been set in this case, which is from January 2020 to June 2021, and covers the beginning to the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, one Canadian/United States sports league is examined in this case, the National Lacrosse League.

After identifying the research question and context of the case, researchers need to have some study guide that will show them the idea of the study. Thomas (2011) classified six different types of case study guides, which are all based on the time dimension (Thomas 2011). Snapshot case studies examine a particular event during the current study period (Thomas 2011).

Given the context, this study is based in a snapshot case study, as this study captures the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Examining a professional sport league during the COVID-19 pandemic makes this particular, because almost every sport league was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas the case of the NLL is just one particular case. As well, this case fits the snapshot case study as this case was also happening during the study period, where data was collected in a primary time of the case.

3.2 Participants & Sampling

Based on Yin's (2014) statements on case study research questions, answering the research question articulated earlier can be done best using interviews and archival records for data collection. The goal with the methods, in this case, is to get descriptive information about the types of strategies used during this time of crisis. Based on the case type and the recommendations from Yin (2014), a small number of participants were recruited for the study. Potential participants identified were employees from teams around the NLL and the League headquarters themselves. The recruitment method used was purposeful sampling. NLL employees are identified publicly through their websites. Each NLL website was researched, and employees were selected to be recruited by identifying and analyzing job titles and compared to the crisis management literature as being involved in crisis management. Participants were emailed requesting their participation (See appendix B). They were also provided with the ethics policies that apply to this study. Thirty-five invitations were sent, with seven participants agreeing to participate. Participants, representing four NLL and the League Office teams, are described in the table below.

Table 3.1 Participants Demographics

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Gender	M	F	F	M	F	M	M
Role Title	Vice President of Marketing	Manager of Communications and Events	Vice President of Marketing	General Manager	Director of Business Operations	Athlete	Director of Business Operations and Legal
Highest Education Level	Bachelors	Bachelors in Sport Communication	Bachelors	Bachelors	Bachelors	Bachelors	JD Law
Years Worked with the organization	<1	2-5	5	20	2-5	3	2-5
Played the sport	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Additional Notes	Worked in music industry prior	Worked for another league	Worked for another league	Worked in media before	Worked in another league	Played college lacrosse	N/A

Six of the interviewees are employees of four NLL teams. The seventh interviewee is an employee from the NLL Headquarters. Description of the employee roles varied depending on where they were in their departments. Each of the interviewees is active in decision-making throughout the crisis. For the directors of business operations, tasks include anything related to the team that is not directly related to lacrosse, such as marketing, sponsorship, customer service, finance, game representation, etc. For interviewees in marketing roles, their energies focused on the branding issues of the team, whether it was the concept, developing content, or community engagement events. The General Manager interviewee is focused more on the players, including travel plans, practice sessions, game strategy, etc. The athlete interviewed also works for their organization in another role. Their role was related to special projects and included any events associated with bringing the team's name to community events, such as community blood drives. Manager of Community Events also dealt with community projects, such as finding events in the city where the team could take part and reporting the community event results in terms of the type of engagement they got from people there.

While the intent was to conduct interviews one-to-one, in one situation, two interviewees were interviewed together upon request. The questions curated for the interview were foundational on past literature on crisis management, and were structured using the three-phase crisis timeline introduced in the literature review. Participants were asked to describe the events of the COVID-19 pandemic, giving their thoughts on how they made decisions during the

pandemic. The interviewees were asked to reflect on their anticipations of the coming year, providing their post-crisis perceptions for the NLL. The interviews were each about an hour long. Archival records of past press releases, news articles, and other interviews was used to get supplementary background information to understand any terminology or other mentioned concepts with participants.

3.3 Data Collection

There is a wide range of sources of information available to case study researchers (Yin 1989, from Creswell 1998). Thus, using multiple methods is ideal for collecting the right amount of data to answer the research question correctly (Yin 1989). The methods to use are chosen based on what the research question is asking, as well as the purpose of the study. For example, if one is looking at a specific location, then direct observation could be done in that specific location. The most common methods used in case studies are open-ended interviews, direct observation, document analysis, and audio/visual inspection (Yin 1989). Of these, semi-structured interviews offer more prosperous and more extensive material about the topic and, if correctly done, can reveal how case study interviewees construct reality and think about the situation (Yin 2009).

Based on these advantages, the main method used was semi-structured interviews. The interviews were recorded, gathering the primary data and storyline of the case. A second method, document analysis, was also used, enabling us to analyze additional information such as press releases, news reports, and social media content to help identify descriptions for the data from the interviews.

Figure 2.3 COVID-19, Crisis Management and Professional Sports 2020 – 2021¹



Three phase crisis management framework from Mitroff, Shrivastava, & Udwadia (1987)

Data Sources: (1) Our World Data (2021), (2) The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), and (3) the Canada Public Health Agency (2021).

As shown in the figure above, the three-phase crisis management strategy is placed on the timeline in accordance to the dynamics of the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, a few critical professional sports responses to the crisis are shown in the figure. These reference points are important because they tell the story's backdrop. These moments are integral to the work that the participants did to help combat the COVID-19 pandemic, where this information is in the results section.

The figure provides both the active COVID-19 cases in Canada and the US and the vaccination path in both countries. Vaccinations are the path to successful reopening, although Canada and the US have already been shown to make different decisions due to political and cultural realities in each country. The data is from the CDC (2021) and the Government of Canada (2021). This graph also references what the COVID-19 environment looked like in the market where the participants are located. Melding the information from these topics creates a timeline that serves as a reference point for the story. Case Study research characterizes events through a timeline to help tell the story of a unique phenomenon (Creswell 1998). Having this

¹ This image is shown in larger scale in Appendix E

figure not only describes how to resolve the possibilities of a crisis such as a global pandemic but will also reveal how the study results reflect what scholars recommend, which will be discussed later in this thesis.

Interviews and document analysis were picked as the methods for this case study as they were believed to be the best to gather descriptive data to answer the research question. It is recommended from past scholars to use as many methods as possible to gather data for case study research. This case focuses on the struggles of the COVID-19 pandemic, but this study also had to face struggles from the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to stay at home restrictions, methods such as direct observation, that would've been ideal to capture the explorative data for this research question, could not happen. Due to limitations, interviews and document analysis were the only methods used for the case, but were highly utilized to get the most explorative data to answer the research question.

In sum, the primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with six members of four teams of the National Lacrosse League (NLL) and with one participant from the League Office who was involved in the crisis management strategies of their teams. Purposeful sampling was conducted for recruiting participants, where a list of the potential participants was curated based on the websites of all the teams involved in the NLL. Descriptions of the participants' demographics are in Table 3.1.

3. 4 Data Analysis and Representation of the Data

As the main objective of case studies is to explain, describe, or explore a unique case. Another important objective is analyzing data based on how the case fits into the setting of the case will create a visual picture for the reader.

The best way to organize the data is to organize based on a chronology of events (Creswell 1998). When the case has several events that lead to a given situation, placing the events in chronological order will lead the researcher to categorize the data easily. This chronology of events recommendation works well with crisis management cases, as these play out in pre-, during-, and post-crisis timelines. Another important aspect of analysis concerns documentation. Documenting a case study well has the evidence with appropriate footnotes and citations to the data collection sources (Yin 2009). The overarching objective is to present the data without preconceptions or bias and keep any generalizations as fair as possible (Yin 2009). The result

should be a description that paints a complete picture of the situation. Bias was limited as much as possible by asking simple questions in the interviews that were consistent across all interviewees, and clarification was asked for information that was unclear.

Following recommendations by Stake (1995), categorical aggregation was used, identifying common instances between participant interviews, and creating themes. Then, the common themes were analyzed between the crisis management literature three-phase framework mentioned above in the literature review, and commonalities and differences between the data and the literature were identified and analyzed. Categorical aggregation is the most common form of case study analysis, used to identify instances from the data while hoping that issue-relevant meanings will emerge (Stake 1995). After the interviews, transcriptions were created and analyzed with a software titled NVIVO, which helps the researcher code and analyze data. The content for the document analysis was also coded through NVIVO to supplement any descriptions that the interviews had. Through this software, categorical aggregation was conducted, and several themes were identified from the interviews. These themes were then compared to the three-phase crisis management framework.

The analytical objective was to create a detailed description of the strategies and actions used, or not used to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. The context led to the decision to place the events chronologically, using the time to organize the data. The results will explain the participant stories as recommended by Merriam (1988). The story structure will help to answer how the teams' strategies developed.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This research follows the ethical guidelines based on the University of Saskatchewan (Policies n.d.) and TCPS2 (Government of Canada 2020). See Appendix A for the Ethics Certificate. An assessment found that this research is low risk. The focus of this study was on the strategies that these participants used, and there was little to no discomfort expressed in the interviews. If interviewees ever felt uncomfortable about the questions of the study, they had the right to refuse to answer any of the questions and opt out at any point in the research process. Additionally, during the interviews, the participants were each asked if they felt any discomfort by the interviewer's questions. This process done in the beginning and the end of the interview.

During transcript analysis, the interviewee's anonymity was maintained by numbering the participants. These numbers were placed at random, linking the order of the interviews. Interviewees were required to sign consent forms (form shown in appendix C) before the interview. This process was to ensure that they knew their rights before the interview began. They were informed again of their rights to opt-out before the interview started. After the interviews, transcriptions were sent to interviewees, where they reviewed and revised the transcripts as needed and signed a consent form to approve the data in the transcription. Only one error was reported in the transcriptions by the interviewee and was removed from the data. Interviewees who did not want certain pieces of information in the data asked this information to be removed, which was removed before the transcription process began.

Due to the circumstances of the pandemic, the interviews had to be conducted either through WebEx or telephone. This environment allowed convenience and comfort for the interviewees, as they were likely in their own homes during the interview.

Chapter Four: Results

4.1 Background: The National Lacrosse League (NLL)

The National Lacrosse League is a North American box lacrosse league that was founded in 1986 (About Us 2021). The league has 15 teams, with nine in the United States and five in Canada, with one more team joining the league within the next few years. Seasons begin in either the final two weeks of November or the first week of December (NLL.com 2021). The regular season ends the final week of April, with playoffs starting in May, and the champion crowned by the end of May (NLL.com 2021). A team's weekly schedule is one game per week. Despite currently being a second-tier league, high attendance and a newly signed 2020 six-figure sponsorship agreement with AT&T Turner Sports (Young 2020), puts the NLL on the cusp of being a top tier league. With this agreement, the NLL increased its annual ad revenue projection per season to roughly \$6 million; an increase from roughly \$2 million per season dating back to 2016 (Young 2020).

The League Head Office is in Philadelphia, where lacrosse operations are managed. Their leadership consists of the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner, and four other executives in Broadcast/Content, Business Operations, Lacrosse Operations, and Marketing/Events/Communication. The departments in the offices are Sales/Partnerships, Lacrosse Operations, Marketing/Communications, Business Operations/Team Services, Broadcast Content, and Consultants. Within this office, they work with an assortment of committees where the participants are selected from various teams, which includes athletes, owners, and executives. These committees range from a competition committee to a players committee, all dealing with certain issues of the league. The executives, departments, and committees all work together to ensure all the key responsibilities are met including conduct, safety, communication, player development, updates, finances, etc.

The teams operate as their own entities, each with their own owners. The most common ownership structure is when several executives organize as an entity to own a team. Some of these entities own multiple teams, where some will own teams both within the NLL and with other professional leagues. Teams across the NLL have similar functional departments, such as marketing, ticket sales, finance, and operations. The League office employs the athletes, but the teams itself select the athletes. Since the league began, revenue from all sources has been

insufficient to fully support the athletes; therefore, most athletes have other jobs in the off-season. Some athletes will even have second jobs with their teams.

Teams work extensively with several stakeholders in their day to day game operations. The first stakeholder, which is one of the most important, is the sponsor or sponsors. These are national and/or local companies that have their business name placed in different places, such as arena or stadium, merchandise, or social media posts online. Other key stakeholders are the various media companies that cover the lacrosse teams and their games. They are important because they are independent, and they play a crucial role in portraying the team and the sport to the fans throughout the communities. This is also an important stakeholder as they are independent parties that play an important role in portraying the team to the fans and throughout the community. Local, provincial/state and federal governments are additional stakeholders. These stakeholders are involved in approval processes for teams to be in the communities as well as events surrounding the teams. Gaining ongoing support from these entities is a part of any team's growth in a market. Fans are vital stakeholders for the teams and the league. Fans, as consumers buy tickets to the games, listen or watch games while not attending them in person, generating excitement for the sport. The teams and the league appreciate the fans very much, particularly the season ticket holders. Finally, there are various organizations within the market of the team, such as schools, hospitals, recreational lacrosse programs, etc. which collaborates with the team itself to create a heightened interest in the sport.

During interviews, it was common to hear the interviewees talk about the game as being an exciting sport where it's like soccer, hockey and basketball all rolled into one. The players are constantly running back and forth to advance the ball with their lacrosse sticks towards the opposing net. It moves very fast, and it gets fans very excited. The NLL makes game nights particularly exciting by having theme night events on game days. These themes change over the course of the season, with some having holiday themes like Christmas or Valentine's Day. Still other themes are chosen based on events that are unique to the community where the team is located. For example, the Saskatchewan Rush hosted a "Prairie Pride" night during their 2019-2020 season to celebrate the prairie characteristics of Saskatchewan. Still other games have celebrity guests welcomed and introduced to fans. The Saskatchewan Rush featured David Aries for a game (in what became the last game prior to the pandemic). At the time, Aries was virally

popular for being an emergency goaltender for the NHL's Carolina Hurricanes. It is events like these that bring in fans to the games and creates an exciting event for the communities.

One interviewee noted that when the pandemic put an end to the season, they were amid planning an exciting final four games prior to playoffs. The interviewee said they wanted fans excited for the upcoming playoffs, with their team in the hunt for a championship. Other markets were in a similar situation of wanting to make the last four weeks of the season very successful, with plans to bring in well-known celebrities and popular athletes to join in on in-game festivities. Various campaigns were being scheduled such as diversity campaigns to increase engagement in new markets with the teams. Meanwhile, there was a lot of excitement about an expansion team in Fort Worth, Texas, that is planned to be launched in the 2021-2022 season. Overall, before the pandemic struck and put an end to the season, there was a sense of excitement growing within the NLL, with teams preparing for the playoffs.

4.2 Pre-Crisis Phase: December 2019 -February 2020

News reports of a mysterious virus began appearing in late December 2019. COVID-19 was formally given a name by the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 9th, 2020 (AJMC 2020). By January 20th of 2020, the US Center for Disease Control (CDC) announced that they would start to screen for COVID-19 cases in US airports, as additional cases of COVID-19 began to appear in Thailand and Japan. On January 21st, Dr. Zhong Nanshan confirmed that COVID-19 could be transmitted from person to person, thus inciting the need to declare a global health emergency (AJMC 2020). Two days later, the city of Wuhan, China, where COVID-19 was originally founded, went into quarantine as 13 people died and 300 were sick from the virus, along with cities surrounding Wuhan also going into lockdown (AJMC 2020). By January 31st, the WHO declared a global health emergency with COVID-19, as 9800 cases were declared throughout the US, Germany, Thailand, Vietnam, and Taiwan (AJMC 2020). Three days later, on February 3rd, the US government declared a public health emergency (AJMC 2020). On February 25th, the WHO warned that this virus would reach a pandemic status, as the virus met two of the WHO's three required factors for a pandemic: illness causing death and human transmission (AJMC 2020). The only requirement not met at the time was worldwide spread.

While these events were unfolding, the NLL season was in its second and third months of the 2019 – 2020 season. The crisis management literature makes it clear that the pre-crisis period should be a time of ongoing scanning, giving organizations the chance to anticipate crises and then generate strategies on how to deal with a crisis that has been anticipated. During the interviews, interviewees were asked to identify if they knew of any crisis planning that was already in place that they were able to draw from, as signals from the WHO and other sources were alerting the world of the potential for pandemic conditions. None of the interviewees reported that such plans existed. Two interviewees noted that there were plans in place for emergency situations such as adverse weather conditions delaying a team back into their home city, or storms occurring during games, but no plans were put in place for a crisis as serious as a global pandemic. One interviewee noted that protocols were put in place for emergencies that could disrupt the organization, but that their protocols “were not that good” (participant #1).

When it comes to the NLL during this time, the regular season was still in operation. One interviewee noted their last four games were approaching, which are typically their biggest games in terms of creating excitement within their fan base prior to the playoff season. As indicated earlier, other teams brought in celebrities to join in the in-game festivities and some markets were incorporating diversity and inclusion, all to increase fan engagement, particularly in the new markets. In summary, the league was very pleased with the progression of the season and was looking forward to a successful playoff season. Then everything changed with Covid-19. This would soon be called the pre-crisis phase, as the global changes were about to occur.

One of the first questions in the interviews was when did the interviewees become aware of COVID-19. This awareness occurred between December 2019 and January 2020. One theme that consistently came up from this question was naivety to the situation that was unfolding in China and around the world. Interviewees felt that there was a lack of understanding of what impact this crisis was going to have on North America. Two interviewees recalled noticing news reports about the virus even in December 2019, but at that point, they did not see it as something that would come into their market, and thus was not placed on their radar. Their decision was to monitor the situation, using a wait and see approach. They noticed that the situation was getting worse in the months of January and February and could feel these effects as they began thinking about whether there might be difficulties with the virus and their business. Another interviewee said that during meetings with their owner in January and February 2020, they discussed their

concerns regarding the increasing Covid cases in China and its potential effect. That owner does business in China, enabling them to have an early awareness of the growing crisis. A couple of interviewees mentioned seeing people in airports with masks, which got them a little apprehensive, but overall, they did not notice any seriousness in their environment. Still another interviewee talked about shadowing an NHL game during that time and, with COVID-19 cases already appearing in that city, the NHL team was already talking about the situation. But the interviewee also said that he believed that naivety was also prominent with that NHL organization regarding the crisis. Teams were travelling throughout North America, and it seemed as though the business of the season was the focus. Later on, interviewees said that informal discussions had come up about the virus at this point, but no serious concerns were expressed, and no plans were made during this time. But participants made it clear that these informal conversations were happening, with the league and teams wondering as to how it would affect the league.

One event mentioned by two interviewees was the League Business Summit held in Las Vegas at the end of January. This Summit has League office and business partners involved and is a normal event that happens in person about three to four times a year. These interviewees mentioned that there was talk about the virus but there was no discussion about plans for dealing with the crisis at these meetings. An out of arena game event was being planned, which was located outdoors on a military base to be held at the end of February. Two interviewees went into more detail about this event. This game was scheduled at a location that was different from where the team usually plays. But, in the weeks just before the game, there was an increasing number of cases in that city that the location had to be converted to a quarantine centre, therefore the event was canceled. This cancellation was disappointing for the team and the league, as the game was set to go, with tickets sold.

Three participants mentioned that as February ended, initial and informal plans were being brainstormed and executed regarding COVID-19 and the games. One interviewee mentioned that some game events, such as autograph sessions, were cut from the games and eventually cancelled across the league during this time as a means of protecting the players. For the interviewees, it was a difficult decision to make for their team, as these events cater to the younger fans, and they immediately saw how it impacted these young ones and how sad they were.

4.3 The Crisis Phase: March 2020

In the beginning of March, COVID-19 cases were present in the US and Canada (AJMC 2020). However, they were not in all the NLL markets yet. For example, cases were being identified in Vancouver BC, where the Giants play, but not identified in Saskatchewan, where the Rush play (BC Centre for Disease Control 2021; Saskatchewan 2021). On March 11th, the WHO declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic, and leaders of the WHO expressed being “deeply concerned by the alarming levels of spread and severity” (AJMC 2020). Overall, the concern of COVID-19 was increasing throughout North America.

At this point in March, the NLL was in its 14th and 15th week of regular season games. Games were being played as scheduled, with NLL teams all aware of COVID-19, and with more discussions about what they might have to do if COVID-19 cases were to be reported in their market. Interviewees specifically said that now, deeper discussions were being made regarding what they should do to keep their players, as well as the fans, safe. The assumption was that games were still going to be played, thus there was no plan for cancelling the season. Thus, these discussions were not about preparing for a shutdown but were more about rules and regulations that might need to be put in place for games. One interviewee talked about a team executive traveling with the group to an away game in the beginning of March. When cases began to climb, they “literally began sort of putting a list of things together at that point to say...ok, we talked about this. OK, now how do we implement?”. In various arenas, protocols were put in place regarding who had access to certain areas of the building. Rules were being made with the athletes as to where they could and could not go during game days. One interviewee mentioned that from the operations standpoint, discussions with the League Office had started, as plans and decisions were being made about who should fly with the team to away games and who should not. Additionally, discussions were happening with arena personnel about rules with fans. Proper hand sanitizing stations were being put into arenas, with signs on how to wash hands properly being put in various places. Certain fan events were beginning to be cancelled to limit person-to-person contact.

Two interviewees from different markets mentioned that March is usually a busy season for home games, as playoffs are around the corner and the weather is warming up; thus, attendance levels start to rise. In fact, one interviewee mentioned that their last home game of the

season was the highest attended. As mentioned before, NLL games often host various in game events, ranging from theme nights, hosting celebrity guests, or halftime events. Even in early March, these games, continued to be scheduled and marketed to the audience. One interviewee recalled a time where they had a celebrity guest at a game. Even then some of the safety protocols were in place and the participant recalled seeing this guest meeting fans and shaking their hands, while sanitizing his hands at every chance they could get; such was the concern about the virus even then.

4.3.1 The Crisis Phase: The NBA Season Suspension

In the interviews, it became clear that for teams and the entire league, real plans of action began in earnest on March 11th, 2020. March 11th is not only a prominent date in the timeline of the professional sports industry, but it is also a prominent date around the world. On the morning of March 11th, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (Visual 2021). The Leaders of the WHO were quite concerned at this time that countries around the world were not taking sufficient action to tackle this virus, such as stay at home orders, contact tracing, and rapid testing (Visual 2021). At this point, the entire country of China had ordered that every business had to close, minus essential stores like grocery stores and pharmacies (AJMC 2020). Italy and Iran, the countries with the highest cases, were also in a lockdown mode (AJMC 2020). At around 11 AM EST, Dr. Anthony Fauci, top infectious disease expert for the United States, testified before the US Congress to state that the COVID-19 pandemic would get significantly worse; his declaration came less than two hours before the WHO announced the global pandemic, at 12:30 PM EST (Visual 2021). By 2:00 PM EST, the Mayor of San Francisco banned indoor gatherings from the city, which caused their NBA team, the Golden State Warriors, to hold their next home game against the Brooklyn Nets, scheduled for March 12th, to have no fans (Visual 2021). Several events went on that day in North American professional sports, including the United States National Women's Soccer Team versus Japan at the SheBelieves Cup, where fans were in attendance (Visual 2021).

Also, on March 12, 2020, in Oklahoma City, the Oklahoma City Thunder were warming up for their NBA game against the Utah Jazz. Just before tipoff, NBA officials went on the court to talk to both head coaches that the game was being cancelled because of the Jazz's Rudy Gobert and his positive COVID-19 test result (Visual 2021). At this point, teams went into their

dressing rooms to be informed of the cancellation while the intended halftime performer came out to entertain the curious fans. Soon after, an announcer told fans about the cancellation of the game, telling fans to drive home safely (Visual 2021). That evening, at around 9:30 PM EST, the NBA announced the suspension of the season (Visual 2021).

This event in the NBA can be classified as the start of the crisis phase for the COVID-19 pandemic and professional sports, where the suspension was the triggering event that would eventually lead to crisis management strategies being implemented by all professional sports. Almost immediately, the NBA's actions triggered other professional sport leagues from around the world to temporarily suspend their seasons.

Every interviewee mentioned the NBA suspension as the catalyst for understanding the impacts that this crisis was going to have on them and their organization. All seven emphasized how the realization of the pandemic's impact was not felt prior to this event but that after it occurred. Even throughout the experience, the NBA was mentioned as an influence on what they should do with their operations during this time. An interviewee talked about how the actions taken by the NBA on March 11th reverberated around the world; it is as if people talk about it and ask, "where were you when the NBA season was cancelled". It was "The straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak. Because it was kind of the first ripple effect". Cancelling a professional sports season, let alone a game, due to a virus was unheard of, even unthinkable. One interviewee was quoted as saying "how can you expect, you know, our fans to come to games when the NBA is making it clear that that it's not going to go ahead?". Anything moving forward was based on the moves that the NBA made during this time. It was a moment reflected on as the moment that the entire NLL found itself rethinking everything about their immediate situation and what would become of the final weeks of the season, as well as the playoffs.

The participant from the NLL Headquarters recalled that immediately after the NBA suspended the season, the NLL Deputy Commissioner and their team began planning the following day what actions needed to be taken regarding the season based on the NBA suspension. The next day the NLL Headquarters announced a pause of the 2020 season. This meant that the league still had plans to complete the season. At this point, the league offices began meeting with several of their committees to begin planning for a potential return.

In the beginning, these planning meetings were held weekly, with conversations surrounding ideas about what the future will hold for the NLL and how it would impact each

market differently. The early focus was on making plans for the return of the season. The League Office committees gathered as much information as they could regarding COVID-19, from governments, markets, and other leagues. Once the League Office heard that the NBA and the NHL were returning to play with a bubble style format, they began to make plans for that style to bring back the regular season.

Situations such as a game being cancelled, or a season being postponed due to environmental forces are handled entirely by the League Office, as they run the lacrosse operations. So, teams had to wait to hear from the NLL headquarters as to whether their upcoming games were going to be cancelled. To the team interviewees, this was a waiting period to see what league officials were going to do. Interviewees noted several times that the league started communicating with teams immediately after this event, letting them know of actions to take, such as not allowing their players to leave the home market. At this point, the next games in both Canada and the USA were scheduled for March 13th and 14th. Overall, team interviewees noted that at this point, the primary concern was for the health and safety of the athletes and staff, thus the first plan of action was to get the traveling team home as quick as possible, and this overrode any concern about having players be in cities for their away games.

Not only was the NLL Headquarters connecting with other leagues, but the teams themselves were reaching out to other leagues as well. One interviewee recalled their connection with an NBA team, noting that this provided information immediately regarding decisions being made by the NBA. Another interviewee noted that their team shares an arena with an NHL team and that they had to plan their intended actions with each other. Their connections also had to be taken into consideration, as one league from one arena could not play while the other didn't.

One interviewee remembers having discussions with a colleague the night of the 11th and stating that the next day was going to be a big and busy day for them preparing for the future of the season, stating that "a decision had to be made one way or another". Once the NBA announced their season pausing, interviewees noted that the decision to pause the NLL season as well seemed to be the best option at the time. It was almost like "hey, since the NBA did this, we probably won't look good if we do something different". In summary, it was not until the NBA suspension happened, that the idea of pausing a season really came into fruition for the NLL league and their prospective teams.

4.3.2 The Crisis Phase: March 12th 2020 – March 31st 2020

The suspension of the NBA season made everyone understand the huge impact that the pandemic was going to have. At this point, lockdown measures were being implemented in North America, with schools and offices closing. Governments were issuing “stay at home” orders, with only essential businesses, such as grocery stores and pharmacies allowed to be open. On March 13th, 2020, the US government declared a national emergency, followed by a US-Euro travel ban declared on the same day. At this time, the Canadian provinces all declared a state of emergency (Dawson 2020). On March 21, 2020, the Canadian and United States border closed for non-essential travel (McMahon 2021). Because the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were on going during this time, the world was still in the crisis management phase. Thus, the goal was to develop vaccines safely and quickly. As well, people around the world needed to limit the spread of the virus to avoid overloading the healthcare system.

The interviewees discussed the fact that the league told all athletes to wait at home and that they would soon receive directions as to what was going to happen to their season. Once again, the league seemed to be looking at signals from the NBA.

4.4 The Crisis Phase: April 2020 – Spring 2021

Adam Silver, the Commissioner of the NBA, began verbally committing to the continuation of the 2019-2020 NBA season in April, about a month after the pause (Wojnarowski 2020). In May 2020, rumors began evolving regarding professional sport leagues returning to play in bubble-style operational formats (Wojnarowski 2020). These formats included the games being played in one location, rapid testing, and locked in borders to monitor who comes in and out. This included no fans being allowed at events. By July 2020, 22 NBA teams were invited to the Disneyworld Resort in Orlando, Florida to compete in the final regular season games, as well as a playoff tournament to complete the season (ESPN 2020). The bubble was a massive success, with new opportunities for sponsors and television deals; engaging the season in this manner was estimated to prevent a loss of 1.5 billion dollars in revenue (Beer 2020). Many other leagues followed suit with the bubble format to return to their paused seasons. The NHL had two bubble locations in Edmonton and Toronto, to run their playoff games (Kaplan & Wyshynski 2020). The Women’s National Basketball Association also followed a

bubble style format (Hamby & Ogwumike 2021). Still other leagues attempted the bubble style format, but were unable to pull it off, such as the Canadian Football League's efforts to have a bubble format for their 2020 season in Winnipeg, MB (Canadian Press 2020). For other top-tier leagues, the NFL continued their 2020-2021 season as regularly scheduled, with stadiums having partial capacity, as well as a Super Bowl with partial capacity (NFL 2021). The MLB started their season later than usual, in July of 2020, with stadiums also at partial capacity, and held their World Series with partial capacity (Randhawa & Adler 2020).

The NLL was one of those leagues who, like the CFL, struggled to operate during the pandemic. It was around March 21st, when the NLL paused their season due to COVID-19. Through their committee meetings, along with planning discussions with government officials, the League office went through every bubble style format scenario to try and make a continued season work. The largest obstacle for them was having no fans in the arena, as much of their revenue comes from ticket sales from live games.

When asked to talk about the initial pause in the season, participants described it as an unreal experience. One interviewee recalled the pause as "something out of a movie". Two interviewees noted that in the beginning of the NLL pause, they had the perception that the season was going to resume, so they began planning for games that would need to be rescheduled.

The days after the NLL suspension were described as a busy period for participants. All normal operations for the NLL Headquarters and teams were shut down. Within hours following the decision, the message was passed down to general managers, coaches, players, and other traveling staff to not get on planes and to go home immediately. Two participants recall hearing athletes from their teams waiting in the airport to board their flight, only to get a message from their coach to go home immediately.

While the NLL Headquarters was busy during the first few weeks working on plans to revive the 2019-2020 season, players, coaches, and staff from the teams were forced to work from home while they waited for the NLL Headquarters decision. When discussing this time, interviewees highlighted the fact that there had been constant communication with the NLL Headquarters. They would keep teams updated weekly as to what the plans were looking like and there would also be various meetings on topics such as marketing, allowing opportunities for attendees to bounce ideas off each other. The interviewees really appreciated this communication

because during a time of high uncertainty, they had a good insight as to what was going on and what the future looked like for the season, ultimately making running their operations easier.

A relationship that was noted as important to interviewees during this time was connections with top tier professional leagues. Four interviewees from two different markets in the research were involved in an ownership group that owns both the NLL team and a top tier professional sports team in North America. This ownership was noted as an important aspect in the plans because the top tier teams were ahead of the game in terms of planning for the return of the season. The owners, executives, and other members involved in the top tier teams would communicate their plans with these interviewees allowing them to become aware of their status. This communication was deemed extremely important, especially for the team in the same ownership group as the top tier team, as their timelines would have to follow in the same manner. These interviewees noted that this relationship was quite helpful, as they could select ideas that would work best for their own league, such as marketing plans for social media, and their updates for their bubble style playoff runs. Interviewees revealed that the sports industry is quite connected, and all levels are motivated to help each other in terms of planning. The communication from other leagues continued throughout this time which provided invaluable information, particularly for the lower tier leagues such as the NLL. The interviewee with the NBA connection mentioned they were updated continually by the NBA regarding their plans which provided guidance and a sense of certainty in terms of planning for their own league during a chaotic time. One interviewee noted that given their relationship with a neighboring NHL team, they were able to select ideas from that team that would work for them through organization meetings in the beginning of the pandemic. Not all interviewees had this relationship with a top tier league, but still had connections with these top tier leagues and teams. This created their own marketing messages during the pandemic.

Eventually, it became clear that the bubble style format would not work for them. On April 8th, 2020, the NLL announced that the regular season was cancelled. On June 4th, 2020, the league formally announced the cancellation of the post season, and that they were shifting their focus to the 2020-2021 season. As the pandemic worsened, and the regular and post seasons were cancelled, the teams had to absorb the realization that play was over for the year. One interviewee discussed this cancellation with a sense of fear. They thought about the fact that they rely on live attendance for their game revenue, “we cease to exist without live games. If we

can't have games, you know, how can we not cease to exist?'. Overall, disappointment in the cancellation was shown by all interviewees. But they were resigned to it, and they talked about needing to move forward with their work despite the new reality.

Communication with the NLL Headquarters and other leagues was ongoing, but at some point, after decisions were made, it was time to start communicating to the public. Two interviewees discussed planning for this important marketing action – communication with fans. The interviewees said that this came down to simple messaging. As many fans' concerns were the uncertainty of the scale and impact of the pandemic, as well as overall health and safety, messages to the fans were based on these principles. The impression was that this messaging made fans feel safer about the uncertainty ahead. In addition to this, interviewees noted that the immediate operational decisions were to pause media spending and other expenses, as they knew there was no reason to market the team at a time when the season was paused. At the same time, some interviewees talked about how their teams started to assess and plan on how to keep their fan based engaged while keeping media costs as low as possible. One interviewee mentioned a social media marketing campaign they created with athletes, and other team staff titled "life without sports", which was designed to promote a healthy living during lockdown. These posts included workouts done by various athletes, team executives demonstrating cooking recipes, and other activities that fans could do during this time. Even though each NLL market has different fanbase sizes, their shared goal during this time was to keep themselves engaged with the market while they waited to return. Through their unique strategies, engagement seemed to work for all of the interviewees, as they mentioned that their fans are excited to return to the games again.

The pandemic was a difficult period for everyone; the fear of catching COVID-19, sense of isolation from stay-at-home orders, and increasing hospitalizations and deaths created a tough environment all around the world. Thus, one aspect that was mentioned with interviewees was helping out their community in any way they can. With such an unbelievable environment, interviewees felt that sports teams can help fans feel some type of normalcy by keeping them motivated during a difficult time. Thus, interviewees did what they could to help with the battle of COVID-19, such as delivering meals and providing team merchandise to frontline workers, donating PPE (personal protective equipment), or conducting drive-by parades for young fans. One team interviewee noted that their team owner alone donated over one million US dollars' worth of PPE to their city hospitals. Not only did they work to help the COVID-19 battle, but

they were also wanting the community to know that they were there for their city, and they will continue to be there when this pandemic is over. One interviewee discussed how they were getting messages from fans indicating how either they themselves, a family member, or friend had COVID-19, and needed their spirits to be lifted. This interviewee got athletes to send video messages to these fans wishing them to get well as they recovered from COVID-19. These personal messages would typically not have been done pre-pandemic, but it did eventually lead to greater personal relationships with many fans. For certain, many memorable moments were occurring that will not be soon forgotten.

In pre-pandemic years, teams in the offseason (June to October), would be going to various summer events in the community to promote the team and the sport. Then with pandemic the restrictions (summer and fall of 2020) these events were not happening or were just occurring virtually. These teams had to invent ways on how to get themselves out in the community. Whatever events were happening, such as charity fundraisers and community events in the city, interviewees made sure to take part in them, virtually or in person. One interviewee did mention their team attended an in-person charity event in the summer but noted how different it was due to government restrictions. Fewer-than-expected people were there, and the event did not have as great an effect on fan engagement as they hoped.

One lesson that was learned through the interviews was a sense of opportunity that this crisis was able to give the teams and the League. This pandemic allowed teams to improvise and create their own types of events. An example of such an event which proved to be very important, was the development of junior lacrosse programs. Three of the interviewees highlighted this event. For some markets, these programs normally happen every off season and are designed to bring the sport of lacrosse into youth recreation programs in the city, while promoting the team. For one interviewee, their team had to immediately cancel these summer plans for this program because of the pandemic and mentioned how much of a loss this was to the team. Two of the interviewees noted that this program only started because of the pandemic. These interviewees are from different markets but their experiences starting their programs during the pandemic were quite similar. Parents affiliated with the organization (members of the organization or season ticket holders) were trying to find ways to keep their children busy since most schools were still online. Both interviewees noted that they had the space to create camp style programs for children of many ages while following government restrictions, thus

they were created. Athletes and coaches living in the market were able to work at the camps, teaching the students about the game of box lacrosse, as well as being able to expose them to the excitement of an NLL team. These two interviewees saw great success from this program. One mentioned that some of their camp goers went on to play varsity lacrosse for their school teams that fall. As the programs continued, and restrictions changed, more kids were able to play. Meanwhile, the program's safety protocols continued to be updated by the local and provincial or state guidelines. By the end, one interviewee mentioned that they had a wide age range playing lacrosse at their program, from young kids just learning how to play, to actual NLL athletes living in that market who just wanted to keep up their training during this time. In summary, these programs were created because of the pandemic, giving them a way to keep fans engaged as well as attracting new fans to the game. Participants are excited and will continue the program after the pandemic, as they will have a new and excited fan base ready to watch when games resume next season.

Another event that was mentioned in the interviews was the NLL draft. The NLL was the fourth professional sports league in North America to host a draft during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though seasons were paused, drafting new athletes during the pandemic were worked into professional sports schedules, as bringing in new athletes are a crucial aspect to the sustainability of the game. Prior to the pandemic, most sport leagues usually have a major draft event at one place, with fans in attendance. For the NLL, this location is usually in Philadelphia. However, because of the pandemic the draft ended up being held virtually, like most other professional sports. It was held on September 17th, 2020. The League Office interviewees discussed the draft several times in their interview. For them, the virtual draft was one of the events that was the most different and allowed them to learn how much they, as a League, were able to adapt to the drastically changing environment. As the interviewee recalled, they ran the virtual draft almost entirely from their mobile phone, locating people from around North America, rather than locating them at an in person location like Philadelphia. Even so, they were still able to execute, which surprised them.

The draft is also important from a marketing perspective, because when fans see that new, highly talented athletes are joining their favorite team it can get fans excited about the future. One interviewee emphasized the importance of this event during a pandemic. The interviewee indicated they are in a market that does not know lacrosse or the team very well, so

engaging their fanbase is crucial. When there are no games being played, making the market engaged in the brand is very difficult. With this draft, the interviewee said they created a greater than normal amount of marketing content for their draft picks. This was done not only to keep fans more engaged during this uncertain time, but also to get them excited for the upcoming season. The fan reaction was positive, with more fans excited in their market than normal for the upcoming draft picks.

An interesting opportunity that was mentioned by one interviewee for their market was the social media app Tik Tok. Tik Tok is a video based social media app that gained widespread popularity in North America during the pandemic, with their number of users more than doubling in 2020 (Tankovska 2021). One of the largest creator groups on the app are called the “Sway Boys”, who are a group of content creators living in the United States. This group gained wide popularity during the pandemic, getting millions of followers, and grabbing many sponsorship deals (Nasir 2021). One interviewee and their team had the opportunity to work with some of the creators from this group to create content for their own account. One of their employees had connections to this group through the app. The team reached out and a relationship began. The interviewee stated that they invited the creators to play some lacrosse. What resulted was video content that was created for the brand through Tik Tok, YouTube, and other social media platforms. The content resulted in success, with the team’s Tik Tok page being the most followed page of all the teams in the NLL. The team has three videos from this session up on the video streaming site, YouTube, which currently sits at over 4000 views. The interviewee has mentioned they plan on working with Tik Tok creators in the future, especially when games return hoping to gain a new fan base and to increase the engagement with the existing fan base.

Another media content that was created from the pandemic was podcasts. One interviewee described how their team was noticing that sports audiences were tuning into a lot of podcasts in North America. The 30th most listened to on podcast platforms in North America is Pardon My Take, a sports podcast created by Barstool Sports (Barstool Sports n.d). This led the NLL team to create its own podcast, which is hosted by commentators from the team. During episodes, they discuss all things lacrosse with invited guests. This interviewee highlighted in their interview that, prior to the pandemic, they could not create media such as a podcast because they were busy working on other projects. As the season and other normal operations shut down,

there was suddenly much time available, so they changed their focus to developing a podcast. The interviewee said that they found out how easy it was to create the podcast and that it turned out to be a great opportunity for their team to keep fans engaged during the wait for the NLL to return. Such a simple project is something that the team can easily see continuing to grow once the pandemic is over. At the time of the interview, the podcast was in its beginning stages with only one episode out. The interviewee highlighted how engaged the fans already were from just one episode and noted their excitement for the opportunities that it could have for their team and the sport of lacrosse moving forward.

The three-phase crisis management strategy discussed in the literature review places emphasis on the importance of communication during the crisis phase, both internally and with other stakeholders. Communication activities with their fans and with the communities was important, as stated by all participants and as highlighted above by the engagements during these months. As discussed, communication with the League Office was continuing, although not as frequently or as intense as had been the case in the early months. Another stakeholder they were communicating with was sponsors. Sponsors are very important to the success of the teams financially. When the season was paused, participants noted how important it was to immediately contact the sponsors and inform them as to what was going on. The sponsors felt quite terrible for the team, as they understood what this uncertainty could mean for their operations. After the pause, talks began on how both the team and the sponsor could collaborate with each other creating ideas that could benefit both parties. All interviewees noted that most sponsors kept their commitments for the next season, although some small businesses were not able to keep their commitments, which was understandable by the teams.

In addition to the communications and events directed to fans and communities already mentioned, season ticket holders were a special concern to the teams. Contact was immediate to season ticket holders, informing them of the situations and the options that were available to them. Every market studied in this project has unique characteristics, but all interviewees noted how excited their loyal fans are to look ahead to seeing the NLL return to play. Two interviewees emphasized how understanding their fans were of the situation, with one expressing how they were quite surprised at this reaction.

Still another stakeholder, the government, was also discussed. The League was in continual discussions with the Federal and provincial governments regarding their plans.

However, when it came to the individual teams, the extent of the communication with the government varied amongst the teams. For example, two interviewees emphasized a constant communication with their provincial government regarding their return to play plan, whereas one interviewee noted that they had little to no communication with their local government and just followed the publicized guidelines. Overall, the teams heavily relied on following the government's guidelines as they were released to the public.

As this suggests, the early months of the pandemic were associated with a flurry of activity by the NLL headquarters and by the teams. As the League moved on from 2020, interviewees noted that activities began slowing down and there was a pause in planning for future games. With fall of 2020 approaching, the League Office was still considering whether they could have a season for the 2020 – 2021 year. If there was to be a season, it would have needed to start by the end of November 2020. Communications began picking up in the fall of 2020, so that fans would know that the NLL was still alive and well and hoping for a return. The League Office committees worked on bringing in the same bubble style format for the 2021 season. The League Interviewee noted how the plan for this season was looked at as a way to bring in opportunities for the future, such as new broadcasting opportunities. However, in the middle of their planning, the Canadian and United States border restrictions changed, becoming stricter as variant cases were increasing in North America. These, along with other factors, made it difficult for the league to see the bubble moving forward, and thus resulted in the cancellation of the return to play plan. On February 3rd, 2021, the league announced the cancellation of the 2020-2021 season, with a focus on the next season. Currently, that focus is still committed to the upcoming season, with first games scheduled for December 3rd and 4th 2021.

4.5 Heading into the Post-Crisis Phase: Summer 2021 and the 2021-2022 Season

Much has changed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of this writing, it is early summer, 2021, a time when vaccines are widely available to Americans and Canadians and the percentage of the population vaccinated is rapidly rising. COVID-19 case numbers are decreasing, with hospitalizations and deaths declining at a rapid pace. Provinces and states are working on easing the restrictions that were implemented over a year ago. The US and Canadian governments are continuing to work on finding a date for when they will open the border to non-essential travel again.

The professional sports industry has also changed since the start of the pandemic. After the bubble seasons ended for the NBA and the NHL, their next seasons began in December of 2020 and January of 2021, respectively (Staff 2021; NHL.com 2021). Today, both leagues have just completed their post-seasons, playing in arenas in the US at full capacity for both NBA and NHL playoff games. In Canada, the first game with fans in attendance since the pandemic began was at an NHL post-season game in Montreal, with only 2500 fans in attendance (Bourne & Engels 2021).

The future looks positive for these top-tier leagues in North America. However, the future is still uncertain for most of the second-tier professional sports leagues in North America. Of these, the CFL has announced their commitment to returning to play in the 2021 season.

Through their planning, the NLL's hope was to be able to play a bubble style tournament in April of 2021, very similar to the NBA and the NHL bubble used in 2020. The interviewee representing the League had a role in planning for this bubble type tournament. As part of final planning, the NLL Headquarters had to present a plan for the Canadian federal government that detailed all the protocols that they were going to have in place to keep everyone safe. As they were entering the final phases of developing their plan, the Canadian federal government changed their border restrictions. Further brainstorming revealed that it would be impossible to implement a tournament under this restriction. Thus, the focus for the NLL shifted entirely to a 2021-2022 season, with a start date of the weekend of December 3rd and 4th, 2021.

Interviewees are understandably focused on preparing for the next season. Rather than continuing to work remotely, the interviewees talked about how employees will be coming back to work in the office soon, with interviewees emphasizing that they want to make sure that everyone feels safe first. Two interviewees said that plans for health and safety protocols probably will not be discussed until later in the summer of 2021, while another interviewee stated that their health and safety protocols were already being planned back in March 2020.

Ticket pricing strategies were discussed in the interviews, but interviewees noted that these decisions will not be made until they get an idea of how many fans, they will be able to have in the arenas. Interviewees mentioned that, with the presumption that the next season will happen, there is already planning for in-game events for their home games. One interviewee described how several departments of the team are involved in planning for the next season, including being encouraged to share ideas for making the next season exciting (for example,

theme nights). Another interviewee mentioned that they are continuing their communications with a top tier league, giving them ideas for how to relaunch successfully following the pandemic. With plans for the upcoming season (2021 – 2022) underway, interviewees emphasized how marketing needs to give a lot of thought to how best to promote games in a post-pandemic world. After all, it is a world where fans have been locked away from most sports for over eighteen months. Almost all interviewees noted that the priority message they want to pass on to fans is again that health and safety guidelines will be the priority when implementing plans to bring back fans to the arena. Health and safety protocols were not only discussed regarding fans and games; but were also mentioned for the front office personnel.

One interviewee indicated that before the pandemic, their home games were positioned as being as much of a social event for the community as they were for being a sports game. This interviewee believes that when they start promoting the games again, the message that will be given to the fans will be a reminder of the appreciation for the social aspect of the games and the community. One other interviewee noted that their message to the fans will be their commitment to the community. Their team did so much during the pandemic to give back to the community, so they want to reassure the fans that they will always be there for the city. This interviewee also mentioned that because they are still educating the community on the brand, their marketing plan will still be in place when the season comes back, but with a twist that will include the story of resiliency from the pandemic as the games return to play from the pandemic. One other interviewee mentioned that they have not begun to work on the marketing message yet; for them the logistics of getting operations back up and running is their main objective for now.

Overall, a broad range of stakeholders continue to be included in the communication concerning the upcoming season. Interviewees want to make sure that everyone involved has a say in their development, including utilizing their stakeholders to ensure that they create the best plan for launching the upcoming season. One interviewee noted his personal relationship with season ticket holders where he has been calling them occasionally, checking in on them and listening to their concerns about sports, returning to stadiums, and about anything they'd like to share regarding the situation. He says that these calls are helping them shape their plans. The final stakeholder that was talked about is the athletes. Athletes are living in different locations across the continent, so it is difficult for the organization to keep up with all of them. Two interviewees who are involved with lacrosse operations discussed how conversations and

meetings have been ongoing with the athletes since the pandemic began, through weekly zoom meetings and virtual workouts. The goal has always been to keep the athletes in as much of a routine as possible. Before taking any actions toward team practices or team workouts, interviewees continue to stay abreast of the guidelines that their provincial, state, and federal governments provide the public.

4.6 Final Reflections Across the Pandemic: January 2020-Spring 2021

In the last part of the interview, the interviewees were asked to look back over the crisis and reflect on the strategies they used during the pandemic. The first question asked was whether there was an emergency plan in place for events such as a pandemic. The interviewees each revealed that there were no plans in place for a crisis event of this magnitude. One interviewee talked about how they know what to do in a crisis such as a weather delay preventing a team from making it to an away game. But they said that this preparation gave them no readiness for coping with the pandemic.

When asked about if they would change any part of their strategies or decisions made to handle the pandemic, most interviewees said they would not change any of their strategies they implemented. As several commented, given government restrictions and communications from the league, there was only so much that they could do. They waited for information from mainly government and the League Office to come in so that they could choose courses of action. In the meantime, they were making decisions that focused on the health and safety of fans, players, and staff. The interviewees talked about how the government and the league were the ones making substantial decisions about operations. One interviewee, looking back, stated that they would not necessarily change their strategy, but would have planned earlier for their strategies. The interviewee from the NLL Headquarters had a similar stance on their proposed strategies. They explained that there was only so much that they could do given their time and resources and believed that they did the best they could with that. Overall, interviewees were quite proud of how they and their organization handled the effects of the pandemic.

Interviewees said that adaptation was an important necessity from this experience. One interviewee mentioned that what they learned the most out of this experience was the power of digital media. As an organization, they had to entirely connect with their fans online through platforms. Whether it was through using social media to reach out to fans or zoom meetings,

teams and the League were able to maintain their business operations while working to engage with fans. They believe that digital platforms are something that they will use more in the future. The interviewees who ran the junior lacrosse programs also discovered the opportunities that they can create. Even though games were not being played, they were still able to keep fans involved and excited for a returning season. Regarding planning for possible crises in the future, several interviewees mentioned that this pandemic has sparked a realization of the need for emergency plans. One interviewee went deeper into the fact that possible emergency plans have already been discussed within their team. In doing so, they have identified what they have learned from this pandemic and have gathered possible ideas that could be instrumental in dealing with another crisis in the future. With the interviewee from the NLL Headquarters, creating emergency plans is very important to them. This interviewee worked a lot with the legal side of the league and described how difficult it was not having any legal terminology, or any force majeure clauses relating to a halt in operations. Moving forward, these lessons will be taken into consideration now that operations are moving into the post pandemic world.

4.7 Using the Three-Phase crisis management strategy to understand the actions of the NLL during the pandemic

Each interview was categorically analyzed. The organized data was then reviewed to determine the extent that teams and the league were found to use strategies recommended in the literature on the three-phase crisis management strategy (left column of Table 4.1). As shown, there is little indication that pre-crisis actions and preparations had been taken in the NLL prior to the pandemic. The reasoning for this happening seems to be that they didn't think that a global pandemic would affect their league at all. The interviewees didn't seem to have a full understanding of their environment, and thus, no planning was done. Had these interviewees had more plans set for a crisis such as this, quicker, and more effective decisions could have been made when dealing with this crisis. Then, during the crisis, it seems that teams and the league were consistently engaging in most of the recommended actions. Less consistency with recommendations was again present in the post-crisis phase (Table 4.1). These observations will now be further detailed.

Table 4.1 Three-phase crisis management strategy and whether Participants mentioned actions reflecting elements of the strategy

3-phase strategy	Participants							Quotes
Pre-Crisis (ordinary times)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Environmental scanning								
Information Gathering								
Issue Analysis/Dissemination	√							<i>“You know there have been SARS and those kinds of things that that weren’t as widespread in Canada as you know other places, so I think it was. It was sort of a thought, okay, if this is a SARS thing then we’ll just monitor. I don’t think anybody realized how widespread it would become.” – P4</i>
Developing strategies	√	√	√		√		√	<i>“It was not like we need to prepare for a shutdown. It was that we need to prepare for the safety of our fans and hand sanitizing and educating them on washing hands and not touching your face.” – P5</i>
Scenario analysis								
Developing “crisis management” team or department					√		√	<i>“I know our VP was in (because he) had come to Toronto for the game and we met the night that he arrived and we literally began sort of putting a list of things together at that point to say...ok, we talked about. OK, now how do we implement?” – P4</i> <i>“There’s a medical committee that the League has lots of conversations with them and then a discussion with the, you know, the Board of Governors themselves to say you know what we can’t go ahead or we’re going to go ahead.” – P7</i>
Crisis containment/prevention							√	<i>“You know guys are guys are going to end up at airports if you don’t tell them you know, hey, we’re not doing this sort of thing.” – P4</i>
The Crisis (Extraordinary times)								

Crisis Awareness/"surreal" information gathering	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	<i>"So, at the beginning it was. it was just something out of a movie, you know, in the very beginning." – P3</i>
Deciding on the best strategy quickly	√	√	√	√	√		√	<i>"The next day *** was sending out emails..." – P7 "On that Wednesday (NBA cancellation) that's when we said, OK, we need to make some decisions. "– P4 "It all kind of...the ball started rolling on Wednesday night (NBA cancellation. – P5 And then after that it was very much, you know, kind of like a hurry up and wait sort of situation." – P3 "(the Commissioners) were very proactive in making sure to be very detailed and very complete about here's where we are, here's what we hope to do, here's what we're thinking right now. "– P7</i>
Unified organizational culture	√	√	√	√		√	√	<i>"Because we're part of a larger organization and you know the (other professional team) um kind of lead the charge and they were set to play." – P5 "We were very fortunate that our owner did not furlough anybody in our organization. We actually were hiring people during Covid." – P6 "We started involving more team doctors and I know when getting ahead of myself but and more medical personnel, more arena personnel or broadcast personnel." – P7</i>
Strategy Implementation	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	<i>"...But we can control the controllable like anything that we were in our.... Ability to have a say over like let's focus on that first." – P1</i>
Flexible strategy changes	√	√	√		√	√	√	<i>"...but it kept evolving right? because we obviously didn't know how bad it would be or how bad it was at the time, I guess in different parts of the world. But we kept having to evolve our plan into something different because the circumstances kept changing."- P3 "So once everything got cancelled, we kind of shifted gears into how we can</i>

							<p><i>kind of give back to the community in different ways that we can support.” – P1</i></p> <p><i>“It was also an opportunity because I actually started the Junior Program during Covid.” – P3</i></p> <p><i>“So, it was day to day at first, and then it was like week to week, we'll evaluate.”- P7</i></p>
Well-structured crisis management team						√	<p><i>“Yeah, there's a lot of our committees. It's essentially everybody who's typically involved with the planning of our league was involved in this.”- P7</i></p>
Stakeholder involvement	√	√		√	√		<p><i>“...And then we were certainly receiving daily communication from our league.” – P3</i></p> <p><i>“All of our sponsors, so, all of them have staged in alignment with us and they've given us a commitment for next season.” – P5</i></p> <p><i>“Just huge uh, you know, anticipation and excitement for next year knowing that our fans are going to be right there with us and they didn't want to take a chance losing their seats.”- P3</i></p>
Efficient and honest crisis communication	√	√	√	√	√	√	<p><i>“As soon as information that we had could, well we wanted to get out to everybody”. – P3</i></p> <p><i>“The trickle-down effect it would come from our president and our president would just relay the information”. – P6</i></p> <p><i>“Our head coaches or president. We obviously had a chat with all of them to discuss next steps”. – P4</i></p>
Post Crisis (Returning to Ordinary times)							
Prepare recovery strategy	√	√			√	√	<p><i>“I think our biggest thing that we talk about is giving confidence to our fans. We want them to feel confident returning and we want them to feel safe and we you know are going to do everything that we can and everything to follow public health orders and to educate our fans and make sure they know you know A) that we care B) that we're doing everything we can.”</i></p>

							<p><i>"... We're like we hope we're going to play season next year". – P5</i></p> <p><i>"Yeah, I I'd say probably really like hard planning. Probably since January there was hope that our League would start in April, yeah?"- P3</i></p>
Implementing recovery strategy		√	√				<p><i>"So, we'll have all that information as we you know, move forward." – P2</i></p>
Receiving Feedback (from stakeholders)			√		√	√	<p><i>"...Like today I just got messages already this morning and yesterday for kids that went to tryouts. So they're making varsity as a freshman and they're like our stick skills are so much better than everybody else on the team." – P6</i></p>
Creating lessons to learn from		√		√		√	<p><i>"I'm fairly proud and confident of how our organizations adapted to this. because it was so unprecedented, yeah, but I really don't know what more we could have done." – P7</i></p> <p><i>"Something that is very hard to plan for and so much of it was, was changing weekly."- P3</i></p> <p><i>"I think that some of these you know, even in the US, you know some of the leagues that have returned to play. We can learn from them, right?"- P4</i></p>
Communication to all stakeholders	√			√	√	√	<p><i>"...we even you know pre now and pre fall and pre summer we were still talking to them every single week so we're we were keeping them in the loop." – P5</i></p>
Redesign strategy		√					<p><i>"Definitely the words were definitely in discussions with the arena in terms of, uh, building. You know, you know, plan a Plan B. Plan C for expected capacity." – P5</i></p>

In the pre-crisis phase the most frequent activity mentioned was developing strategies. However, there were almost no indications of doing environmental scanning, information gathering, or scenario analysis, potentially leaving teams and the league without the preparations for crises that would give them a head start in responding to a crisis. In the crisis phase, the most frequently mentioned strategies are crisis awareness, strategy implementation, and efficient

communication. Oddly enough, having a unified crisis management team was only mentioned by one interviewee, which creates the question of how these strategies were developed in the pre-crisis phase. Finally, the most mentioned strategies in the post crisis phase were recovery development, lessons learned, and communication to all stakeholders. However, this stage is currently not finished yet for the interviewees, and thus should be looked at as a perception of the future.

Overall, teams put more emphasis on the crisis phase to deal with the events that were happening with the pandemic. When looking at the literature, the pre-crisis phase is the most important phase, because it is where organizations are developing strategies to handle any possible crisis that could cause significant damage to business operations. In the case of the NLL, preparation plans for smaller emergencies were in place, but no plans were in place for a crisis as big as a global pandemic. The perception was that an event like this would never happen. Thus, what resulted was the NLL and teams figuring out a plan of action right when the crisis was happening. If the NLL had been able to plan for a global pandemic, they might have recouped some of the revenue that they lost due to the fact they did not play, or they might have been able to plan better for a 2020-2021 season.

Strategies that are recommended to be done for the pre-crisis phase were pushed into the crisis phase. For example, strategy development was happening when COVID-19 was already wreaking havoc in both the US and Canadian markets. This is not recommended based on the literature review, as there is so much going on in the crisis phase. Businesses do not want to overload themselves with more stress when they must take care of themselves during this time of crisis. Ensuring family and friends are safe from the virus is worrisome. Having to deal with the fate of a sports league on top of that is overwhelming. However, what seemed to keep this league afloat was the emphasizing and utilization of the other strategies during the crisis phase. The most important being the strategic flow of communication from the top level of the league down.

All the interviewees played different roles on their teams and the league. Everyone was kept abreast of what was happening with league operations during this time. This knowledge created a sense of safety and assurance for employees. As stated in the literature, if employees are kept "in the dark" during a crisis, they can lose confidence in the upper management of the organization, thus losing motivation to work during a time that work is needed. Interviewees never lost confidence in the NLL Headquarters because they were kept aware of what was

happening with the season. Because of this awareness, they felt that they were working with a shared purpose, developing plans for when the league would restart. Another crisis phase strategy that was implemented well was the ability to be flexible at making changes. What contributes to this flexibility is unknown, but it seems as though that this industry in general seems to be adaptive to flexibility. Operations can change very quickly, for example, a star athlete receiving a long term injury, so these leagues and teams are used to making quick changes. Every interviewee recognized that COVID-19 situation changes quickly in North America, almost on a weekly basis. By having flexibility, the teams and the league had advantages; they knew to be adaptive, preparing for changes while not being discouraged when new information meant that revisions must be made to emerging plans. With this flexible approach, they could make the best decisions that they could during a given moment in time and quickly adjust decisions as needed. In the early months of the pandemic, the NLL Headquarters assembled members from their committees that dealt with return to play strategies. The crisis management literature highly recommends having a crisis management team as having a vital role in handling crisis situations. However, as the literature also suggests, crisis management teams should be decided upon, with personnel training provided for crises, long before the crisis struck. Lastly, during the crisis phase, teams and the league were keeping stakeholders involved, whether it was helping with strategies or just communication. Having that involvement helped the teams and the league.

It is suggested that the NLL will be in the post-crisis phase when they are playing games again in the 2021 – 2022 season, with expectations of full stands of fans. The NLL Headquarters, along with the teams, are continuing to make plans for the recovery phase, as they emerge out of the pandemic. From what they have learned, and the fact that they have learned so much from this pandemic already demonstrates that they are poised to make the adaptations needed to emerge as a successful league.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the ways that the National Lacrosse League and their teams have been taking actions and engaging in strategies through the most severe crisis on record, the COVID-19 pandemic. A literature review was conducted, identifying the most frequently advocated crisis management strategies. The interviews consist of employees from the league headquarters and four teams of the National Lacrosse League (NLL). Additionally, descriptive analysis of news reports and league websites made it possible to add rich detail to the stories provided by interviews. The results provided in the previous section follow the timeline of the crisis, ending in anticipations of the coming 2021 – 2022 NLL season. Although additional insights based on the interviewees looking ahead to the 2021 – 2022 season are prospective, it brings the discussion to crisis resolution with a tendency toward hopefulness. Collective results have been how the NLL headquarters and teams in the NLL dealt with this unprecedented crisis and are still.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This research explores the role that crisis management has played in the professional sports industry when faced with the recent COVID-19 crisis. Three main contributions have emerged in researching this occurrence. First, it works to explore a new catastrophic phenomenon. As we have seen from the last eighteen months, a global pandemic can severely impact entire nations, with long-lasting repercussions. Because this pandemic is novel in terms of scale and despite efforts by the research community to study the phenomena, minimal research deals specifically with crises of this magnitude. Crisis management literature has looked at various crises in our world, but has not been looked at in the eyes of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the first contribution of this research is to explore, in real-time, the crisis management strategies of organizations through the pandemic. This research can act as a guide or a foundation for future researchers when studying crisis management when confronted by significant crises.

There are also contributions to research in crisis management as it pertains to professional sports. As suggested in the literature review, there are studies on crises in this sector. However, research on professional sports has not analyzed the effects of large-scale crises with the ability to shut down entire leagues while creating significant uncertainties for when and how to relaunch. The crisis management literature has been examined in the lense of various industries, such as hospitality and the military. At the same time, professional sports crisis literature has not examined crises through the three-phase crisis management strategy lens. This framework is the most frequently used strategic view of managing crises. The second contribution of this research is analyzing the actions and strategies taken by a professional sports league when dealing with the pandemic and evaluating it using a best practices perspective from existing crisis management literature. Having the three-phase framework as the foundation for the narrative of the professional sports industry response to COVID-19 gives future experienced sports researchers a guide for utilizing this framework to do further research and do it well. Crisis management researchers have recognized the importance of planning for crises. The main recommendation from this research to sport managers is to follow this framework, especially in the pre-crisis phase. Planning has deemed to be an essential action when dealing with crisis, as strategies are done before the crisis, and managers can focus on the health and well-being of their employees moreso than the actual actions to take to handle the crisis.

The benefits regarding the three-phase crisis management framework recommended by scholars do not apply to one specific industry but almost any industry. COVID-19 has had and continues to influence most industries around the world. Thus, the final contribution is the flexibility of the framework to apply to any industry. Researchers in politics, health care, hospitality, tourism, etc., have explored the effects of crises in the past. Still, no research on crises in these industries has considered the impact of a crisis-on such a global scale. Utilizing this framework is recommended for researchers examining crisis management in any industry.

This study also adds insight to the application of stakeholder theory, where interviewees made it apparent to focus on the needs of the multiple stakeholders in the crisis situation. Whereas Alpaslan, Green and Mitroff (2009) suggested to have stakeholders involved in the pre-crisis phase in their study, interviewees in this study did not have their stakeholders involved in the pre-crisis phase. What they did do that was consistent with the previous study was have stakeholders involved in the post-crisis phase. There was more disconnect from attribution theory in this study. Whereas attribution theory posits that organizations find causes of events to find the best strategy to deal with that event (Coombs 2007), interviewees in this study did not try to find a cause of the pandemic in order to figure out how they should handle the effects. Instead, they immediately looked at the present situation of the League and teams, and figured out what strategies would be best to limit the most damage at that time. Despite not following what is typically found in these theories, the actions still seemed affective.

5.2 Practical Implications

The three-phase crisis management strategy lays out actions, processes, and strategies for handling crises. Organizations, regardless of industry, can review preparations for crises, along with activities during, to better prepare for the future. This study revealed how a professional sports league, along with their teams, engaged in crisis management strategies and identified gaps from the best practices perspective provided by the three phases.

The three most important practical recommendations that emerge from this study are:

1. Professional sports leagues and teams need to review contracts and other legal documents. If other professional sports leagues and teams have similarly failed to include clauses pertaining to catastrophic events such as a global pandemic, they need to take action now.
2. Put together a crisis management planning team. Additionally, establish processes for the team to quickly assemble and take action as needed when a crisis occurs.
3. Increase efforts to gain a revenue source that can sustain the business through crises. If other professional sports leagues and teams are heavily dependent on game day revenue for sustainability, they would be similarly at risk during a crisis. If television or streaming platform deals could be secured, leagues and teams would be less at risk.

Now that professional sports understand the potential scale of crises, the value of pre-crisis planning becomes worth the time and trouble to undertake. While the interviewees showed the simultaneous importance of having adaptability and flexibility through a crisis, the lack of any pre-planning or crisis preparations likely – almost indeed – caused delays in response and possible early missteps, such as planning for a return to season after the crisis has happened. A valuable lesson from this study is also that of engaging stakeholders through ongoing open communications and being aggressive in information gathering. These enabled the NLL to find ways to grow relationships through the crisis, a valuable outcome for any organization.

In summary, the most critical insight from this research is that it suggests that too little crisis management preparation is in place in second tier professional sports leagues and teams. If this is the case, more emphasis must be placed on crisis management within organizations to minimize the ill effects and losses due to crises. This emphasis is significant because the world now realizes that the word "crisis" can have an entirely different meaning than it had just two years ago. An effort by professional sports leagues to become crisis management ready will not only help leagues prepare for such events but will make teams and leagues more able to deal with minor crises that come their way. What can be learned from what the NLL did was the need to plan for crises. Has the NLL scanned their environment, assessed the probability of a pandemic happening, and developed various strategies that could be used to deal with these probable scenarios, then more preparation for this crisis would've happened. Such preparation works to minimize as much damage as possible from the crisis.

5.3 Research Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

There are several limitations to this research. The first being that the study period concluded before the actual end of the pandemic. This limitation means that the comments made by interviewees about their returning to "business as usual" must be considered hopefulness and conjecture. There is talk that new variants ("Delta") might lead to more spikes in cases, and there is the possibility that additional variants might be more harmful than the current ones. So, one has to expect that the pandemic is not behind us, and it will continue to have effects on professional sports (and the entire world) for a long time. Thus, this research does not capture the full effects of this pandemic. Future research should pursue exploring these effects once the

pandemic is truly over. It might be possible to interview the same interviewees in six to twelve months, making this a longitudinal examination of the effects.

The interviewees involved were involved in the general business operations and, specifically, marketing and communications during the pandemic. However, most of them were responsible for the decisions made in the return-to-play plans for the league. It would have been ideal to have interviewed those involved in making those decisions. They would have provided more insights into the experience making those plans and why they made certain decisions. Future research should also consider looking towards the league's upper management and seeing their experience with the pandemic.

Another limitation is that it is only looking at professional leagues in the Canadian and United States sports market. In these two countries, the pandemic had different effects on each state and province. Meanwhile, these two countries received large doses of vaccines much earlier than most countries, accelerating the path toward post-crisis times. Countries in Asia and Europe were exposed to COVID-19 before Canada and the United States, so their experience dealing with the pandemic will be on different timelines and, thus, a different experience in general than the experience in these two countries. European sports leagues were among the first to return to their sport after the COVID-19 lockdown. For example, the Bundesliga, the German Soccer League, was the first to return with no fans in the stands (Wires 2020). The NLL mentioned their advantage being in Canada and the United States because they could see what other leagues, including those in Europe, were doing to deal with the crisis. Future research should look at leagues outside of these two market to see the similarities and differences in their strategies on returning to play to those of the NLL and others in North America.

This research was guided by case study methods to capture a new and unique phenomenon that is not well documented. During the time of this writing, the pandemic is still affecting both Canada and the United States. As stated in the discussion above, the post-crisis phase is not yet here. The post-crisis phase is significant, as it will show how organizations learn from dealing with the crisis and how they will better prepare for when another major crisis occurs. Since not much was seen of the post-crisis phase, the picture of strategy is not caught of these interviewees. Thus, future research will conduct once the pandemic is over to explore the post-crisis phase.

Further, it is recommended that future research think critically about the extent to existing crisis management frameworks that capture the crisis management engagements by professional sports leagues. There is reason to think that these strategies are not adequate based on the results of the NLL and their reactions to their strategies of dealing with COVID-19. Although evidence shown here indicates that although these teams and the league did not do many of the actions suggested for pre-crisis strategies, they have ended up doing well so far. Further, the teams seem pleased with commitments from fans for season tickets, and they have high confidence in returning to play later this year.

In their defence, the news of this virus hit the world quickly. March 11th was when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, with sports leagues ending that same day. During this time, much was going on, meaning no time for teams to prepare, with decisions made "made on the fly." Of course, therefore, crisis management frameworks recommend that organizations do the pre-crisis groundwork so that crises do not put them in this position. Given that the league and teams seem to have come through this well, the question may become, is there something about professional sports leagues that makes them capable of making quick, sound decisions through crises? Future research should consider a focus on pre-crisis work and examine the strategies that have been recommended or add any other strategies based on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

I grew up watching sports, mainly live sporting events and developed a passion for it. There is something about the storyline of a game, the energy of fans, and the excitement that comes along that makes me so happy. One thing that is special about the professional sports industry is that it engages communities and creates a fantastic connectedness to fans worldwide. Existing leagues are expanding into different markets, and new leagues continue to emerge professionally. This study was entertaining and rewarding for me to participate in for my master's. I was captivated and excited talking with each interviewee, hearing their stories of how they got into their sport and running their businesses. Those who have attended a live sporting event understand the excitement that comes with it. I have been to many NLL games, and I have never experienced anything like it. The crowd is very excited, not only from the sport but from the events occurring throughout the arena. NLL games create a buzz for the home city that extends far beyond the stadium. The excitement is in restaurants, bars, and within the fan's chatter throughout the event before and after games. This enthusiasm results in many people buying and wearing team-affiliated merchandise, which creates a sense of community within the city. Cities significantly benefit financially from having successful professional sports team such as one from the NLL.

Many industries worldwide were able to maintain their revenue generation by adapting to this pandemic, whether it was creating new products or pursuing new business opportunities. The professional sports industry could not venture into new businesses, mainly because they have many expenses, and there were not enough opportunities to play their game to cover those expenses. In this pandemic, we have seen the top four professional leagues in North America continue to play and gain revenue, even without fans. What makes looking at a second-tier professional league interesting in this pandemic is that they could not continue operations without their fans, so they did anything they could to sustain their financials by planning return to play scenarios with potential revenue opportunities to keep the teams engaged in their communities. These interviewees were excellent at giving great insights into how challenging the last year and a half have been for them.

One of the key topics that I discussed with one of the interviewees was how their experience with the pandemic resulted in realizing that there is a need to become better prepared

for these types of occurrences. Global events such as COVID-19 will likely occur again, so an emergency plan is essential. Some of the most affected industries from this pandemic had to be tourism, sports, and entertainment. This year-old crisis reveals how our world has seen businesses fail in the face of this pandemic. These failings' result from pauses with these industries' need for professional sports will be pivotal in the recovery phase, as they can help re-establish economic stability and revive a sense of community within cities. Such a crisis has occurred and has caused global damage and is likely to happen again. It is crucial to understand the crisis management strategies currently being used and search for ways to improve these strategies if possible. What is recommended as the first step in improving crisis management in any organization is to develop a crisis management team, that way, they can focus their work entirely on developing the strategies needed to limit the damage from any crisis that could come their way.

Good news is on the horizon. At this moment (June 2021), vaccinations are on the rise in Canada and the USA. At the same time, COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths are on the decline. Sports that have been unable to complete or launch seasons in 2020 plan to return to play in 2021. For instance, as suggested earlier, the CFL, after going through many talks and a possible threat of another cancelled season, announced that the 2021 season would begin on August 5th, with a shortened schedule (CFL 2021).

Meanwhile, the NLL recently announced the confirmation of the starting weekend for the 2021-2022 season, to occur on December 3rd and 4th, 2021 (NLL 2021). With much excitement from fans regarding this news, the opportunity to grow and recover from this crisis. Still, it is incumbent on the leagues to learn from this crisis to successfully avoid similar sustained losses in the future.

After a year and a half of isolation, fans will finally be able to be with their friends again, celebrating their teams. This subsequent recovery period will show fans and other consumers of sports just how important it is to have these gatherings in our communities. Without them, we would not be able to make unforgettable memories that will last a lifetime. We certainly do not want that to end, which is why we need to remember it, learn from it and create plans for emergencies so that we can continue to celebrate more in the future.

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Appendix A – Ethics Approval Certificate



UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) 08-Jan-2021

Certificate of Approval

Application ID: 2394

Principal Investigator: William Murphy

Department: Department of Management and
Marketing

Locations Where Research

Activities are Conducted: WebEx; Telephone, Canada

Student(s): Jillian Wolkowski

Funder(s):

Sponsor: Edwards School of Business

Title: Exploring the Strategies of Professional Sports Teams in Times of Crisis

Approved On: 07-Jan-2021

Expiry Date: 07-Jan-2022

Approval Of: Behavioural Research Ethics Application

Appendix A: Letter of Invitation

Appendix B: Leaflet

Appendix C: Consent Form

Appendix D: Transcript Data Release Form

Appendix E: Interview Questions

Acknowledgment Of:

Review Type: Delegated Review

CERTIFICATION

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TPCS 2 2018). The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this project, and for ensuring that the authorized project is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS

In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month prior to the current expiry date each year the project remains open, and upon project completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: <https://vpresearch.usask.ca/researchers/forms.php>.

***Digitally Approved by Patricia Simonson, Vice-Chair, Behavioural Research Ethics Board
University of Saskatchewan***

Appendix B – Sample Email

Hello participant's name.

You are invited to join an academic research project being conducted by Jill Wolkowski, supervised by Dr. William Murphy at Edwards School of Business, at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Canada.

The project is seeking Employees of the teams and head office of the National Lacrosse League (NLL) that were involved in planning for the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of this research project is to identify attributes that

- o Understanding how professional sports teams emerge and deal with a crisis in a small market
 - o Understand the strategies that professional sport teams use when dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research protocol is approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB) at the University of Saskatchewan. Your privacy will be highly regarded. Any information you provide will be respectfully guarded to ensure your confidentiality and privacy.

Please refer to the attached leaflet for more information. Should you have any questions, you are welcome to contact the Research Ethics Board, Professor Murphy or me using the contact information below.

I would much appreciate your involvement helping advance my thesis toward earning an MSc in Marketing. Thank you in advance for your consideration; we look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jill Wolkowski

Jill Wolkowski Student Researcher Edwards School of Business (p) 280-2058 (e-mail) jill.wolkowski@usask.ca	Professor William Murphy Associate Professor Management & Marketing; Edwards School of Business (p) 966-2769 (e-mail) wmurphy@edwards.usask.ca	Ethics Office University of Saskatchewan (p) 966-2975 (f) 966-2069 (e-mail) ethics.office@usask.ca
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Appendix C – Consent Form

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled “*Exploring the Strategies of Professional Sports Teams in Times of Crisis*”. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask questions you might have.

RESEARCHERS:

Jill Wolkowski Student Researcher Edwards School of Business (p) 280-2058 (e-mail) jill.wolkowski@usask.ca	Professor William Murphy Associate Professor Management & Marketing; Edwards School of Business (p) 966-2769 (e-mail) wmurphy@edwards.usask.ca
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INFORMATION USE:

This study is being conducted as part of the Edwards School of Business Master’s of Science (MSc) in Marketing program. It has been approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Committee of the University of Saskatchewan.

The study will involve interviews with league owners and team owners, as well as key decision makers informing the league about needed actions during the crisis. The interview will be semi structured and use a case study technique. The results of this study will be prepared in a formal report and briefly presented to faculty and student researchers involved with the MSc Program .

PROCEDURES

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews for the study will be performed either through video conference or telephone. The platform that will be used for the video conference interviews will be WebEx, which is the official video conferencing platform for the University of Saskatchewan. WebEx has several features such as video meetings through computers, messaging, file sharing, whiteboarding, and calling. The link to their privacy policy can be seen below.

<https://help.webex.com/en-us/nv2hm53/Cisco-Webex-Security-and-Privacy>

The audio of the interviews will be recorded. The participant may request that the recorder be turned off at any time. If participants do not want to be interviewed through WebEx, they have the option to be interviewed through the phone. The interview will take approximately 30 to 60 minutes.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The objective of this study is to identify and analyze themes in the strategies that sport teams within a sport league use to sustain their business during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is considered a time of crisis.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

There is no guarantee that you will personally benefit from your involvement. However, participants in this study will receive the findings, with the aspiration that these findings will provide insights related to handling crises that can strengthen the actions being taken by the league.

It is hoped that insights gained from this research will supplement existing literature on crisis management and shed light on crisis management in the sports context by highlighting successful strategies used.

POTENTIAL RISKS

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this study. All precautions will be taken to minimize any potential risks.

CONFIDENTIALITY

This project will not deal with any illegal or potentially incriminating activities. Any information that is shared will be held in strict confidence and in a secured location. Any information that could identify you as the information source will be removed during the data transcription and will not be used in any reporting of the findings. With the use of a video conferencing platform, there is no guarantee that privacy of data can be made.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the recording of the interview will be saved to a local computer rather than to the cloud. The security protections will be encrypted for the recording of your interview.

Participants will agree not to make any unauthorized recordings of the content in the meeting of the interview/data collection process.

Due to the sample size, participants could potentially be identified in the context of the data collected, thus compromising confidentiality.

The data will be reported in the publication anonymously in an aggregated summarized form. If there are notable direct quotations from participants, then they might be used in the publication, but will be stated anonymously.

STORAGE OF DATA

The data (electronic) will be securely stored in a password protected computer during the analyses but will be moved to a Usask OneDrive computer system for long term storage. The data will be stored for 5 years post publication. Once the data is no longer required and following the required storage period, the data will be destroyed beyond recovery. Identifying information, (e.g., Consent Forms, Contact Lists) will be stored separately from the data collected.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW

You have been given an informational leaflet which outlined the procedure and purpose of this study. You are aware that you can contact the researchers at any time with any concerns for questions.

QUESTIONS

If you have any questions concerning the research project at any point, please do not hesitate to contact the researchers.

FOLLOW UP & DEBRIEFING

At the end of this study, you are welcome to a copy of the final written report and encouraged to discuss the results with the researchers.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have received information about this research project; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and these questions have been answered.

I consent to participate in the research project, understanding that I may withdraw my consent at any time.

I have read and understood the terms outlined in this Consent Form. A copy of this Consent Form has been provided to me for my records.

I read and explained this consent form to the participant before receiving the participant's consent, and the participant had knowledge of its contents and appeared to understand it.

Name of Participant

Participant's Signature

Date

- Researcher Jill Wolkowski/Dr. William H. Murphy

Appendix D – Interview Guide

Interview: Exploring the Strategies of Professional Sports Teams in Times of Crisis

Preamble: Permission to record

Consent waiver overview

- How did you become a part of the Rush?
- Describe your role with the team.
-

Section 1 - Pre-Coronavirus

- When did your organization become aware of coronavirus?
- What was your perceptions of the pandemic before it came into the city?
- When did you and your organization start to think about planning for a potential pandemic?
- Describe any plans made to handle coronavirus before the pandemic hit.

Section 2 – Beginning of Coronavirus

- Before the pandemic, did your organization have some crisis plan in place? If so, please describe.
- What was your role in developing any plans to deal with the pandemic?
- Describe the official plans made to take on the pandemic.
- Were there any outside stakeholders that were involved in the development of this plan?

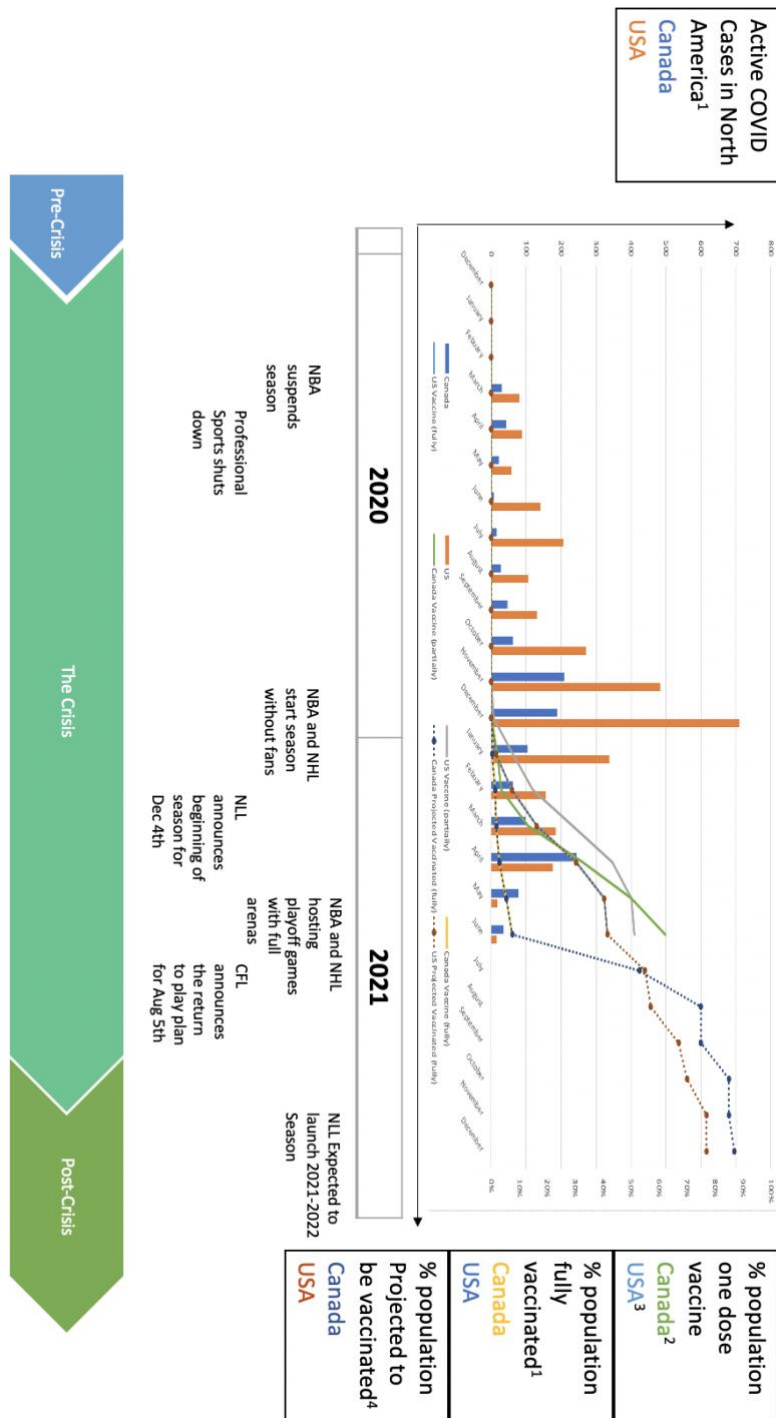
Section 3 – During the pandemic

- Describe the events that took place after the plan was in operation.
- How is information passed down?
- At what point was it time to discuss plans with the public?
- Was there any feedback that was given? If so, describe.
- To what extent has your organization been able to hold onto this plan? Describe any changes that have been made.
- What is the involvement with other stakeholders?
 - o Media
 - o Fans
 - o Sponsors
 - o Govt
 - o Players

Section 4 – Post Pandemic

- Are there any plans to get fans back in seats? What is the marketing message that will be sent?
- With the pandemic existing for one year and due to its uncertainty, where do you see the team moving on in the future?
- What are the lessons that you and your team have learned from this experience?

Appendix E – Crisis Management, COVID-19, and Professional Sports Figure Enlarged



Three phase crisis management framework from Mitroff, Shrivastava, & Udwadia (1987)

Data Sources: (1) Our World Data (2021), (2) The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), and (3) the Canada Public Health Agency (2021).